

# Media Development

1/2022

WACC

Building  
Credibility and Trust  
in the Digital World

# Join the World Association for Christian Communication!

WACC is an international organization that promotes communication as a basic human right, essential to people's dignity and community. Rooted in Christian faith, WACC works with all those denied the right to communicate because of status, identity, or gender. It advocates full access to information and communication, and promotes open and diverse media. WACC strengthens networks of communicators to advance peace, understanding and justice.

## MEMBERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

Membership of WACC provides opportunities to network with people of similar interests and values, to learn about and support WACC's work, and to exchange information about global and local questions of communication rights and the democratization of the media.

WACC Members are linked to a Regional Association for the geographic area in which they are based. They receive regular publications, an annual report, and other materials. Regional Associations also produce newsletters. In addition, members are invited to participate in regional and global activities such as seminars, workshops, and webinars.

Full details can be found on WACC's web site:

[www.waccglobal.org](http://www.waccglobal.org)

## CURRENT MEMBERSHIP RATES

Individual	35 USD
Institutional	120 USD
Student Rate	20 USD

*Media Development* is published quarterly by the  
World Association for Christian Communication  
308 Main Street  
Toronto, Ontario M4C 4X7, Canada.  
Tel: 416-691-1999

100 Church Road  
Teddington TW11 8QE, United Kingdom.

[www.waccglobal.org](http://www.waccglobal.org)

Editor: Philip Lee

## Editorial Consultants

Embert Charles (*Chairperson of the Msgr. Patrick Anthony Folk Research Centre (FRC) of Saint Lucia*)

Clifford G. Christians (*University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, USA*).

Margaret Gallagher (*Communications Consultant, United Kingdom*).

Cees J. Hamelink (*University of Amsterdam, Netherlands*).

Patricia A. Made (*Journalist and Media Trainer, Harare, Zimbabwe*).

Robert W. McChesney (*University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, USA*).

Samuel W. Meshack (*Hindustan Bible Institute & College, Chennai, India*)

Francis Nyamnjoh (*CODESRIA, Dakar, Senegal*).

Rossana Reguillo (*University of Guadalajara, Mexico*).

Clemencia Rodriguez (*Temple University, USA*).

Ubonrat Siriyuvasek (*Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand*)

Pradip N. Thomas (*University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia*).

## Subscriptions to *Media Development*

Individuals worldwide US\$40.

Libraries, universities and other institutions (access may be shared with students, staff and users): US\$75

The contents of *Media Development* may be reproduced only with permission. Opinions expressed in the journal are not necessarily those of the Editor or of WACC.

Cover artwork: Brad Collicott

Published in Canada

ISSN 0143-5558

- 4 Editorial
- 6 Impacts of digital transformation on communities and societies  
Ellen Ueberschär
- 11 Dreaming of the common good  
Dennis Smith
- 14 Digital justice  
Heinrich Bedford-Strohm
- 20 Bridging the gender digital divide from a human rights perspective  
Association for Progressive Communications
- 24 In what ways has the digital era changed the notion of public space?  
Working Group
- 37 Communication for Social Justice in a Digital Age  
Symposium Manifesto
- 42 The Copenhagen Pledge  
Tech for Democracy
- 43 Corona, the digital divide and Indigenous peoples  
Donn J. Tilson

## 47 On the screen

### VISIT

WACC's collection of resources on digital justice

<https://waccglobal.org/resources/digital-justice/>

### IN THE NEXT ISSUE

The 2/2022 issue of *Media Development* will explore the role of media in representing the stories and hopes of Indigenous peoples in Canada.



WACC is a member of the  
**actalliance**

One of the foremost texts in English exploring the thorny subject of media ethics in a digital age is founded on the protonorms<sup>1</sup> of truth, human dignity, and non-violence, while simultaneously arguing for understandings that are both local and global, specific and universal. In particular, the author warns against merely applying ethical thinking from earlier media ecosystems to the new:

“Global media ethics requires a systemic approach to technology. An appropriate ethics for the digital age cannot simply extrapolate from print or broadcast systems. A decisive shift in media technology has taken place, and today’s online media cannot be understood in functional and mechanical terms as electronic artifacts. Since technologies are value laden, fundamental work on the character of media technology as a whole is necessary for the long term.”<sup>2</sup>

This concern and many more were discussed during the symposium on “Communication and Social Justice in a Digital Age” that took place in person and online, Berlin, 13-15 September 2021. The aim of the symposium was to explore the many impacts of digital transformations on communities and societies worldwide. It brought together

research, experiences from different regions and marginalized communities, expert input on economic and political trends, and ethical reflections in an attempt to identify opportunities to advocate for democratic digital inclusion.

The symposium was organized by the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC), international ecumenical organizations that affirm communication as a basic human right, essential to people’s dignity and communal life, and that strengthen networks of communicators to advance peace, greater understanding, and justice. The event was co-organised by Brot für die Welt, the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), Evangelische Mission Weltweit (EMW), and the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF).

The programme had three thematic parts. *Digital Justice*: What do social justice and social injustice look like in the digital era, especially for marginalized people and communities? *Public Space*: In what ways has the digital era changed the notion of public space? *Vision for the Future*: What vision do we have of a more just digital – and human – society and how do we help to bring it about? Particular attention was paid to social media, with all their challenges, complexities, and covert mechanisms.

In recent years, a great deal of controversy has been generated by social media platforms. On the one hand are the many positive aspects of digital connectivity, including global networking, instantaneity, helping to overcome poverty, revolutionizing healthcare, and aiding humanitarian relief. On the other hand there are serious problems in



relation to surveillance, security, privacy, hate speech, incitement, and the misuse of data. Oversight, regulation, and accountability are lacking.

Few people are happy with how social media work writes Richard Seymour in *The New Statesman*:

“Platforms regularly change their rules and design with no accountability to users. The ‘community guidelines’ stating what content is permissible on their platforms are ineffectual against bullying, trolling and bigotry, and yet have never offered fully ‘free’ speech. The way platforms utilise their monopoly over user-generated data is shrouded in secrecy.”<sup>3</sup>

This issue of *Media Development* presents some of the reflections that took place before and during the symposium, which itself can be viewed as the start of a lengthy process of reappraising digital communication rights and the way digital technologies are changing society and perhaps even the nature of being human. As keynote speaker Ellen Ueberschär argued:

“The forces of democracy and public welfare must stand together in the fight to build credibility and trust in the digital media world. Digital participation is not a luxury or merely nice to have, but a prerequisite for the development of inclusive societies.”

Social media are also changing how people govern and are governed, with implications for the democratic life of societies or, in some cases, undemocratic repression. They are part and parcel of corporate business and the international banking system. But they are also helping to tackle some of the world’s biggest challenges, from human rights violations to the climate emergency, and they are becoming ever more useful in situations of natural or human made disaster.

Such positive benefits are to be welcomed. At the same time huge divides remain:

economic, geographic, racial, educational, class, gender, age, cultural, technological, and global. There are also divides caused by the digital technologies themselves that reinforce inequity, exclusion, and mistrust. All must be tackled in a holistic and inclusive way so that the digital age is genuinely at the service of humankind.

As the symposium’s Manifesto underlines:

“To achieve digital justice, we need a transformative movement of individuals, communities, educational institutions, media agencies, and civil society – including communities of faith. We need government policies and actions that are informed and supported by civil society, founded on human dignity, human rights, and democratic principles.” ■

Photo credit: sdecoret/shutterstock

#### Notes

1. Protonorms are the underlying presuppositions necessary for ethical reasoning.
2. Clifford G. Christians. *Media Ethics and Global Justice in the Digital Age*. Cambridge University Press (2019, p. 32).
3. Richard Seymour. “In a lonely place. The internet was meant to bring the world together. How did it go so wrong?” *The New Statesman*. 8-14 October 2021.

## Recent issues of *Media Development*

4/2021 Communicating Climate Change

3/2021 Democratizing the Public Sphere

2/2021 Revisiting MacBride: Communicative Justice Today

1/2021 Coming To A Screen Near You: The Future of Cinema

*Media Development* is provided free to WACC Individual and Institutional Members and is also available by subscription.

For more information visit the WACC website:

[www.waccglobal.org](http://www.waccglobal.org)

# Impacts of digital transformation on communities and societies

Ellen Ueberschär

*When did you discover your communication rights? Your right to get transparent and trustworthy information, your right to read the texts that are meaningful to you and to share your own thoughts with others or to make them public?*

I can tell you when I discovered my communication rights. By the age of 16, I had learned to touch-type at high speed. Typewriters were worth their weight in gold in East Germany during the 1980s. The Iron Curtain was still in place and information access, distribution, let alone a free press, were completely restricted by censorship.

But I typed with a vengeance, copying books and magazines that had been smuggled into the East. Books by Dorothee Sölle, books about the Stalin Era, books written by dissidents. My parish taught me freedom of speech. It was the only space for open-mindedness. Illegally, I took back the communication rights that I had been denied.

Today, I work for the Heinrich Böll Foundation, which has more than 30 offices around the world. The foundation focuses on supporting and working with people in their struggle for freedom and rights. Political lobbying for those whose rights are being violated and whose voices have been silenced is a key part of our mission.

It is remarkable that within WACC communication was defined very early on as a human right: a radical idea whose actual implementation and enforcement – as I see it – has yet to be realized, but which will be of central importance in the age of digital communications. This

underscores the importance and the changing role of WACC as a network with its ideas, impulses, prescience, and its special focus on vulnerable groups.

We must already note here that the relationship between freedom of religion and communication rights is by no means easy, and that it also requires debate and conviction within the Christian spectrum. My vantage point today is a political one: What are the most pressing issues in the digital world regarding social rights and human dignity at the moment?

## Advantages of digital

During the pandemic we all learned to appreciate the advantages of digital communications. We even celebrated the Easter service online. We stayed in touch with our loved ones via Zoom and Skype; some of us were able to do our work completely online and the home office will stay as a natural part of our professional lives. Traffic in the air and on the streets decreased, so there was even some relief for the climate.

But at the same time, we saw governments using the pandemic to install new *surveillance* apps, pretending to combat the pandemic. The World Health Organization spoke of an *infodemic*, ubiquitous disinformation and fake news – massively amplified by social media and by so many people's access to both information and disinformation.

We also saw digital companies that raced like a rocket to the top of financial *indices*, whereas *democracy indices* marked a decline in media independence and ability to function. "The broad scale attack on the media as an independent actor and provider of information critical to the functioning of any democracy is intensifying" (V-DEM Report 2020, p. 25).

Such ambiguity generally accompanies our view of the digital sphere, not only when it comes to mis- and disinformation. However, the less educated, the vulnerable groups, people in rural areas are much more exposed to this kind of infodemic of manipulated media than others. Their communication rights – which include access to diversity and truthfulness of information – are



13 September 2021, Berlin, Germany. International symposium on Social Justice in a Digital Age, co-organised by the World Council of Churches and the World Association for Christian Communication. Left: Dr Ellen Ueberschär. PhotoByAlbinHillert\_AH2\_0256.jpg

violated.

This leads me to my most important thesis: *It's not just social coherence but human dignity itself that is at stake if we do not take up the fight for freedom and dignity in the digital sphere and scale it up to our offline-efforts.*

Technical access to digital communications might be still a factor, but there is more: we must succeed in establishing ground rules for communication in the digital public sphere that enable minorities and vulnerable groups to exchange views and make themselves heard.

The same goes for mechanisms to counter fake news and prioritize true empathy over instant emotions and a culture of indignation that quickly descend into violence. The forces of democracy and public welfare must stand together in the fight to build credibility and trust in the digital media world.

Digital participation is not a luxury or merely nice to have, but a prerequisite for the development of inclusive societies. Free access to information and unhindered opportunities to disseminate it form the backbone of democratic, open and prosperous societies.

In most democratic constitutions, freedom and civil rights are protected. At the same time legal awareness that these rights must also apply

in the digital sphere is not very marked. Indeed, it is sometimes completely lacking.

Hence, we have to fight for digital rights themselves as well as for awareness of communication rights in the digital space. In this respect, I would like to indicate three major challenges and conclude with ideas for necessary steps towards

just digitalization.

### **Surveillance and humiliating control versus informational self-determination and dignity**

The American scientist Shoshanna Zuboff has presented a sociological analysis of the digital era, which has become an epoch-defining international bestseller: “The Age of Surveillance-Capitalism”. Some experts and activists have urged us to read it as an act of digital self-defence.

Zuboff describes “how global tech companies such as Google and Facebook persuaded us to give up our privacy for the sake of convenience; how personal data has been used by others not only to predict our behaviour but also to influence and modify it; and how this has disastrous consequences for democracy and freedom.” Zuboff defines this as “expropriation of critical human rights”. Data streams are being increasingly used for surveillance and control.<sup>1</sup>

Think of dating apps, where it is possible to swipe people away with a finger; think of health apps, where sensitive health data are delivered freely to companies. They may sell them on to health insurance companies.

Do you always know why and when a contact or information is visible for you on Face-

book? Have you ever asked yourself what kind of knowledge about your personal life or the life of your community Facebook has collected? And have you ever asked Facebook to delete something?

Most of us do not. And so the companies become more and more intrusive. From the past we know how censorship works, but we know less about the manipulation of our emotions and behaviour. Zuboff says, “The age of surveillance capitalism is a titanic struggle between capital and each one of us. It is a direct intervention into free will, an assault on human autonomy.”

Meanwhile, *non-democratic governments*, not just China, have learned their lessons. “Non-democratic regimes have increasingly moved beyond merely suppressing online discourse, and are shifting toward proactively subverting and co-opting social media for their own purposes. Namely, social media are increasingly being used to undermine the opposition, to shape the contours of public discussion, and to cheaply gather information about falsified public preferences.”

Regimes have frequently mobilized their supporters to shape the content of online conversations. “Such assistance is particularly important in hybrid regimes like Russia, which do not engage in the direct blocking of websites and focus not on denying access but on successfully competing with potential threats through effective counter-information campaigns that overwhelm, discredit, or demoralize opponents.

These include techniques like mobilizing regime supporters to disrupt planned rallies, plant false information, monitor opposition websites, and harass opposition members. Allegations of ‘web brigades’, in which Russian commenters were paid to post pro-regime comments and discredit the opposition, first appeared over a decade ago. These organized groups were alleged to frequent popular pro-democracy forums to shape the public consciousness.”

We have to bear in mind that social media are not a safe space for human rights or environmental activists.

Let’s take a look at a recent example: Afghanistan. “Services like WhatsApp have been

helpful in evacuating Afghans, but they can also make those individuals identifiable targets. The Taliban’s own presence on social media also raises questions about the platforms’ obligations. The Taliban established a Twitter presence in 2011 and has maintained WhatsApp and Telegram accounts since 2015. Since then, the group has been waging an Internet campaign, sharing its stories on social media and relying on clever propaganda, appealing to far-right groups around the world.

In theory, the Taliban are not welcome on these platforms. They were classified as a dangerous organization by both Facebook and YouTube some time ago. Twitter, on the other hand, has not imposed a blanket ban on the group. In practice, banning Taliban content is not that simple.”

This rapid evolution of government social media strategies has critical consequences not only for the future of electoral democracy and state-society relations, but affects trust in information and communication generally.<sup>2</sup>

Let us be hopeful: There is more and more consensus on the urgency of regulating intermediaries with regard to the democratic public sphere and their influence on opinion-forming processes in society. There is open debate about a regulatory framework comparable to media legislation. Such a framework would automatically have repercussions on the fundamental rights of users.

### **Discrimination versus equality and social justice, fairness, and participation**

Another prerequisite of democracy is equality. In a diverse society, equal treatment must be fought for over and over and against every sign of possible discrimination or privilege: from education to the job market or the search for housing. Equality means equal, fear-free participation and access to public goods, spaces, and networks.

However, the business model of algorithm-based selection processes does not imply the principle of equality, but rather the worldview of the coders and the data of the past. Moreover, algorithm-based decision systems are trained ac-



ording to subjective criteria, which are usually non-transparent. This holds significant potential for discriminating against entire populations based on individual characteristics, whether in application processes, the allocation of school places, the assessment of creditworthiness, or in legal decisions (such as in the US judicial system).

Another example is the facial recognition systems used in some countries. Often these cannot correctly identify the faces of black, indigenous, and other people of colour or women, but some are used in law enforcement, prosecution, or prevention. Many examples of discrimination through decision algorithms come from the US. For Germany, in an atlas of automation the NGO [AlgorithmWatch](#) has shown in which areas decisions are also made automatically, from personnel management and unemployment administration to voice recognition of asylum seekers and predictive policing.

AlgorithmWatch has developed [recommendations for action](#), ranging from the principle of “do no harm” to the demand for traceability of decisions and effective supervision of private-sector and government applications. This catalogue is an important contribution to sharpening and strengthening legal awareness in the digital space.

### **Hate speech and digital violence versus media freedom**

The algorithms of intermediaries such as Facebook and Twitter multiply hate speech and ensure the rapid spread of disinformation. The disparagement of serious media and science and the creation of impenetrable information bubbles distort the open opinion-forming process, damage the democratic public sphere, and have also been proven to incite physical violence.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the “infodemic” (mentioned earlier) of disinformation, conspiracy theories, and hostility to science, was life-threatening because scientifically verified information to protect health no longer reached certain segments of the population. Depending on the strength of the public media, these are

different-sized groups of people in different countries.

When it comes to hate speech, on the one hand there are perpetrators who claim freedom of expression for themselves, and on the other victims who suffer intimidation and bullying, whose personal privacy is no longer protected, preventing them from freely developing their personalities. A whole series of scientific studies proves the endangering effects, including self-censorship and consequent psychological damage for those affected, changes in the implicit attitudes and opinions of uninvolved or involved users. Women in particular are more likely to be victims of hate speech and digital violence.

The task for the courts is to develop case law that is commensurate with the risk, which itself is massively increased by the sheer reach of the new media. Insults in the public sphere cannot be compared to insults in the digital sphere, which can be multiplied thousands of times in a global communications network. Existing standards, under which hate speech can be prosecuted in criminal law only in cases of an explicit insult and physical, direct threat of violence, are not sufficient for acts committed on the Net.

To date, hate speech cannot be prosecuted adequately unless it explicitly calls for violence against an individual – this way, most hate speech remains undetected and unpunished. While hate speech happens on global platforms, victims and perpetrators can only be prosecuted/protected by national laws.

### **What do we need to do?**

The forces of democracy and public welfare must stand together in the fight to build credibility and trust in the digital media world. Digital participation is not a luxury or merely nice to have, but a prerequisite for the development of inclusive societies.

Free access to information and unhindered opportunities to disseminate it form the backbone of democratic, open and prosperous societies. Civil society, churches included, have to be

involved in finding what it means to have privacy, self-determination, security and ensure equality and justice in the digital space.

Some important requirements for political regulation are the following:

- \* We need global regulations to restrict the influence of internet platforms – the EU has initiated such laws with the Digital Services Act and Digital Markets Act.
- \* We need Data Protection like the GDPR in the EU on a global scale – global regulations and ethical standards and norms – alliances across the Atlantic are necessary. Right now they include a [Code of Practice on Dis-information](#) among digital platforms.
- \* Data protection is less about protecting data and more about protecting the dignity of human beings.
- \* We need controlling mechanisms for the export of software that might be used for mass surveillance in authoritarian countries.
- \* We need an Alliance of “techno-democracies” for joint resources on critical digital infrastructure that might be more independent.
- \* We need “Pluralismspflicht” [a duty of pluralism] – an obligation to secure pluralism on all big social media networks to guarantee an equal and just space to hear and to be heard.
- \* We need transparency of algorithms and micro-targeting measures.

Another important and major topic is digital education. With educational offerings, a new awareness of defensive rights must be developed in schools, in associations, through political foundations and civil society, not only against the state, but also against private data collectors and users.

Political education includes giving people the tools to use the Internet in both directions. On the one hand, knowledge of one’s own rights in the digital space must be strengthened, because awareness of rights violations and knowledge of dangers protect civil liberties. On the other hand, political education also includes the know-how to use the Internet better for one’s own benefit.

Because it is only with these skills that digital education becomes an instrument for digital participation. Of course, this includes many more aspects, because the barriers to participation are exacerbated or multiplied in the digital world.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, lack of or inadequate access to the Internet had a very concrete impact on children’s educational opportunities when digital learning simply could not be done due to a lack of stable access to the Internet. The fundamental right to the free development of the personality is violated here from the outset.

Another essential factor is the participation of citizens in political decision-making. This includes broad public debate about security and freedom on the Internet, about personal privacy, freedom of expression and much more. These debates, as conflictual as they may be, raise awareness of individual fundamental rights in the digitalized world.

It has been proven that sustained and meaningful political participation strengthens democracy. The more transparent and participatory politicians and administrators are in dealing with the data they collect, with political responses to safeguarding fundamental rights online, with the increase in communication and networking, and with the diverse information options, the more they strengthen the sovereignty of their citizens.

Fundamental rights will not prevail on their own or through voluntary commitments by corporations. That is why the broad support and joint commitment of (civil) society, faith-based organizations, politics, science, and business are needed to guarantee and protect civil rights in the digital age as well to make the digital space usable for the common good. ■

#### Notes

1. *The Guardian*, Interview Shoshana Zuboff: Surveillance capitalism is an assault on human autonomy, Joanna Kavenna. Fr, 4 Oct 2019.
2. Seva Gunitsky, [Corrupting the Cyber-Commons: Social Media as a Tool of Autocratic Stability](#).

#### Links

Internet freedom worldwide: <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/12/opinion/the-future-of-internet-freedom.html>

Informationelle Selbstbestimmung: [https://www.bfdi.bund.de/DE/Datenschutz/ Ueberblick/Was\\_ist\\_Datenschutz/ Artikel/InformationelleSelbstbestimmung.html](https://www.bfdi.bund.de/DE/Datenschutz/ Ueberblick/Was_ist_Datenschutz/ Artikel/InformationelleSelbstbestimmung.html)

Micro-targeting / Cambridge Analytica: <https://netzpolitik.org/2018/cambridge-analytica-was-wir-ueber-das-groesste-datenleck-in-der-geschichte-von-facebook- wissen/>

Discrimination of algorithms: <https://netzpolitik.org/2018/wenn-sie-ethisch-umgesetzt-werden-kosten-sie-mehr-danah-boyd-ueber-algorithmische-entscheidungssysteme/>

<https://algorithmwatch.org/en/busted-internet-myth-algorithms-are-always-neutral/>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/13/opinion/how-computers-are-harming-criminal-justice.html>

Global cases of hate speech / physical violence: <https://hatebase.org/news/2019/11/18/does-online-hate-speech-cause-violence>

Critique of Network Enforcement Law: <https://www.bmjv.de/SharedDocs/ Gesetzgebungsverfahren/DE/ NetzDGAendG.html>, [https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz-netzdg-mehr-kontrolle-und.2907.de.html? dram:article\\_id=494955](https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz-netzdg-mehr-kontrolle-und.2907.de.html? dram:article_id=494955)

Overview of regulation against misinformation worldwide: <https://www.poynter.org/ifcn/anti-misinformation-actions/>

Impact of disinformation on democracy: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/653635/EXPO\\_STU\(2021\)653635\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/653635/EXPO_STU(2021)653635_EN.pdf)

Since July 2017, Ellen Ueberschär, along with Barbara Unmüßig, has been one of the presidents of the Heinrich Böll Foundation. As president of the foundation, she is responsible for the foundation's domestic policy department, for foreign and security policy, and for the European Union/North America department. In addition, she is in charge of the scholarship department, the Green Academy – a think tank of scholars and politicians – as well as the research archive “Grünes Gedächtnis” (Green Memory Archive). Between 2006 and 2017, she was the secretary general of the German Protestant Church Assembly (Deutscher Evangelischer Kirchentag). In this function, she coordinated six Protestant Church Congresses and one ecumenical.

# Dreaming of the common good

Dennis Smith

*Since time unremembered, humankind has used language, gesture, and other symbolic systems to create meaning in common. And from these distant beginnings to today's social media platforms, competing power elites have struggled to control access to and dictate the terms of distribution of these systems.*

Economic elites have sought to dominate them for profit and competitive advantage. Religions have sought to sacralize them, designating gatekeepers to control access to the sacred. Political and military elites have sought to set the terms of public discourse, and to define the limits of acceptable expression so they can consolidate, protect, and expand their own power.

We have come to describe those spaces where communities create meaning in common as “public space”. They are the spaces where a community develops its understanding of the common good, building a life together, exploring ethical values and experimenting with aesthetics, but also sharing information and analysis as people hold one another accountable, debate and advocate for public policy.

While those in power have always sought to exert hegemony over the systems humankind has used to create meaning in common for their own benefit, no attempt to control public space has ever been completely successful. Today's digital, online, and legacy media platforms – even when they are privately owned and operated to promote the interests of sectarian groups – are still public spaces where human communities express the creative impulse and question what it means to belong.

When elites attempt to control public space,

it is not uncommon for them to stigmatize or even criminalize difference. In such contexts, to be excluded from public space is to be silenced, made invisible. Nevertheless, humankind has always found ways to resist tyranny and dream other realities into existence.

### **The consumer society**

Today, these platforms are dominated by a neoliberal consumerist ideology that defines the value of human beings as being a function of everyone's ability to consume ever-increasing amounts of goods and services. Such an emphasis on the individual and his or her capacity to consume has contributed to a social imaginary where both the powerful and the powerless are consumed with the power of capital. The consumer society spawns a culture of desire that dangles before individuals the promise of instant gratification and cultivates seductive visions of achieving status through the act of consumption.

Neoliberal consumerist ideas are so deeply embedded in many communities today that many people – and the political leaders who “represent” them – cannot conceive that other value systems are possible. Global trends indicate an increased sense of tribalism, manifested in suspicion and fear of the other. In such circumstances, it can become difficult even to contemplate interactions outside of one's “tribe”. Not surprisingly, the breakdown of common public space has contributed to the breakdown of many communities' ability to imagine the common good.

In a consumer society, digital conglomerates consolidate their control over large scale data collection and manipulation. By doing so, they turn individuals and communities into the subjects of forms of manipulation in which, almost from birth, they are exposed to feedback and confirmation loops in “public” spaces – although these spaces are privately shaped and controlled – in which our characters, beliefs and aspirations are formed.

In this context, we must ask, “Who is our community?” Traditionally, our communities are the groups with which we collectively interact

in a public space. Indeed, these interactions are what create the public space. Here we ask, How are the boundaries of membership set? Who sets the rules of engagement? How does the community decide what issues are to be raised and how they must be decided?

As communities learn to navigate these issues in the emerging media ecosystem, they have learned that the social media now reign supreme. The problem is not the social media *per se*, but that the driving force behind them is the maximization of profits and, thus, the monetization of all human attempts to create meaning in common.

### **A matter of life or death**

Instead of people being able to organically shape public spaces, including through trial and error, they are driven and deliberately manipulated by this consumerist ethic. While social media create the possibilities of all kinds of new public spaces to emerge, those that emerge tend to be infected with this mercenary virus, shaping the space and thus the “communities” that are shaped by them.

This dual process of both creating new forms of digital public space, and polluting it in specific ways, also exerts major influence over existing non-digital public spaces. In the most practical sense, existing media (many of which are also manifestations of an earlier generation of corporate elites) are strongly affected by their loss of income. By hijacking traditional income streams – especially advertising – emerging digital platforms weaken the legacy media.

One notable result has been to limit the creation of news, narrowing the range of sources available to communities to deepen their understanding of the wider world. Precisely the world in which they must learn to discern the flow of power and build alliances as they seek to apply democratic principles and build the common good.

Now that most of humankind has access to digital and online social media, the stakes for excluded and minority sectors of society are high. As ownership and control of these media has

been consolidated in the hands of a tiny number of global corporations, their owners have grown more powerful than nation states.

To be excluded from such spaces means not only to lose access to the cultural commons where communities build their identities, but also implies the risk of physical annihilation. To be silenced, to be made invisible, can be a death sentence. Whether we are speaking of the indigenous peoples of the Amazon defending their lands from usurpation, the Uyghur community in Xingiang, African American young people insisting that Black Lives Matter, or non-binary youth discovering and celebrating their identity, to know one's self as a member of a community with common interests and common struggles and for such communities to be able to represent themselves and their point of view is quite literally a matter of life or death.

As a member of an excluded social group, one quickly discovers that today's social media landscapes can be rife with carefully crafted manipulation and lies, caustic rumours, hate speech and fear-mongering. From the outside looking in, excluded individuals and communities discover that they are not white enough, heterosexual enough, young enough, thin enough, or with sufficient disposable income to match the projected ideal. Transcending the personal, power elites have learned to use social media as tools of disinformation for the manipulation of public opinion to exacerbate existing social divisions and prejudice and to provoke violent confrontations that consolidate their hold on power.

Theologians note that the current neoliberal consumerist system functions very much as a voracious, bloodthirsty idol that demands human sacrifice. To cast the excluded, the silenced, those made invisible, onto the garbage heap of history is justified by the elites as collateral damage in their drive to perpetuate the current system. The author of the New Testament letter to the Ephesians describes this almost mystical power in this way, "Our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this

present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12).

### **Corporate capture of public services**

The growing power of the social media over public space also demonstrates new forms of "corporate capture" of government functions and responsibilities. While city planning, medicine, education, communication infrastructure, transport, and governance generally are only very slowly waking up to the potential of artificial intelligence and the use of data to improve services and create new ones, these corporations are moving into government sectors, offering "free" data and services (just like social media do to individuals) but at the price of impunity and freedom from existing regulatory frameworks.

Yet, these key government functions and services each act like a miniature public space, bringing people together to provide shared services and enabling people to interact. Even these little eddies of interaction are now being occupied by digital corporations, closing off small but vital conversations within and between communities and between communities and government, and subtly imposing new ways of operating which further empower the corporations and erect barriers between people.

Despite all the very real limitations of this emerging media landscape, we must remember that the very existence of social media has changed the way many people (particularly the younger generations) think about media, having moved from a largely passive process to one that is essentially interactive. Even if only a minority of those that consume social media produce content, it's a much larger group than what the legacy media have accustomed us to.

### **A democratic renaissance?**

The long-term impact of all this is hard to foresee, but it is unlikely to return to the top-down, unidirectional model characteristic of traditional media. This may lead to a reshaping of the public sphere and of people's expectations in

which a greater level of participation – a sort of democratic renaissance – becomes the new normal. The character of that participation, and the possibility of its contributing to a more just and sustainable society, will clearly depend on factors of social and political organization that go beyond the digital realm.

The pandemic (and the climate/ecological crisis) have further polarized our societies between extreme individualism on the one hand and, on the other, a greater awareness of the need for community as well as the importance of public services and policies in defence of the common good. This is likely to be a major confrontation in the coming years.

Civil society organizations, of which the ecumenical movement is one, are called to defend access to and the integrity of public space as uniquely important in developing a shared vision of the common good. This is not easy in the current system, where corporations exert unprecedented dominance over the economy, politics, and culture, but it is both urgent and necessary.

We must be committed to participating in the creation of *democratic public communication spaces*, spaces for considered dialogue – both analogue and digital – that would explicitly strengthen excluded voices; guarantee citizens the right to own and control their data, information and knowledge, free from commercial, state or other co-option; and contribute to, uphold, and validate social justice, communication rights, and the common good. ■

*This article is a synthesis of discussions by a study group, made up mostly of researchers from the global South, to prepare WACC's contribution to the Symposium on "Communication for Social Justice in a Digital Age", Berlin, 13–15 September 2021.*

Dennis Smith, a past President of WACC, has recently retired as Presbyterian Church (USA) Regional Liaison for South America. For 43 years, Smith worked in communication training, advocacy, and social research with churches and civil society groups in Central and South America. Later research came to include comparisons of the influence of religious media on partisan politics in Central America and Brazil and the growing impact of religious, economic, and political fundamentalisms in the region.

# Digital justice

Heinrich Bedford-Strohm

*If Christian faith is about bringing the gospel into dialogue with life, if we as the church have the task of reading the signs of the times, as the Second Vatican Council has told us to do, and if we can only fulfil this task ecumenically because as Paul says "Christ is not divided" (Rom 1), then we need to do exactly what we are doing today: reflect on digitization and its spiritual and ethical and political implications – and do so ecumenically.*

There is no doubt that digitization is a crucial dimension of the "signs of the times". In 1641, the French philosopher René Descartes – in his work *Meditationes de prima philosophia* – wrote a sentence that has been quoted many times up to this day and that stands for the age of enlightenment, "Cogito, ergo sum" – "I think, therefore I am". If we were looking for a comparable phrase for our age, a proposal made by German scholar Gesche Joost would be a good candidate, "I am online, therefore I am."<sup>1</sup>

The broader consequences of the enormous impact of this new technology on our lives are controversial. Some see the injustice of opportunities and resources growing rapidly by digitization. Others praise the possibilities of the talented young woman from the Philippines to design T-Shirts for a company in Kansas, earn a good salary and develop her abilities without ever having set a foot on U.S. territory.

Some rejoice at the medical potential that promises individuals treatment and healing according to their unique DNA; others see a second-class medical system coming that will only allow a few rich people to enjoy and also to afford top medical treatment.

Some happily expect the development of artificial intelligence (AI) that does not just cover self-learning systems, but sooner or later a switch to a consciousness that will be superior to human beings. Others ask concerned questions about where AI development is leading and whether we are moving towards a new religion of “dataism” with extended awareness (Harari) and the classical picture of humankind doomed.

The Churches are in the thick of these discussions about what may come: some see digitization as the fulfilment of a biblical vision. You can certainly sense a little of the Pentecostal spirit blowing in the new possibilities of the digital world and its non-hierarchical communication model of all-to-all. It did seem to me like a communication miracle when I sat with some young students at the Ecumenical Institute in Bossey some years ago, and a young Georgian woman showed me a translation app with which I could simultaneously read what she said in Georgian in my own German language.

Yet, there are some differences between the Pentecostal language miracle and this digital language miracle. The algorithms that govern so much of the digital world are not god-made but human-made. What appears in the digital arena does not come like fate out of nowhere – it is guided and controlled. Those responsible for this change have a phone number and an email account.

Therefore, what happens in and with the digital world needs to be subject to conscious human agency – hopefully with guidance by God’s spirit, but still as result of human agency. This is why it is so important that we come together to seek and find orientation for this agency.

### **Justice for all: The option for the poor as the basis for reading the signs of the times**

The biblical option for the poor has become the key phrase for a characteristic of both the Old and the New Testament and which has gained wide consensus in the churches all over the world. No ideological distortion of biblical witness has ever been able to extinguish this key feature of

the Bible, so prominent in its various layers. We need only recall the notion of human being as the image of God as a source of equality or the astonishing fact that the very founding story of God’s people is a story of liberation from slavery.

We may simply look at the specific character of the law of the Torah as protecting the weak and marginalized or listen to the prophets’ passionate critique of a religious cult that ignores the struggle for justice. We only have to take account of Jesus’ understanding of his mission as proclaiming the gospel to the poor (Lk 4), his critique of a wealth detached from the needs of the community, and his radical identification with the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the strangers and the sick (Mt 25).

We must simply make an effort to understand the deep social, ethical implications of a God whose incarnation on earth ends as a victim of torture, and take seriously Paul’s reflection on the cross as a key to God’s action in the world (1 Cor 1). If we reflect on all this, we cannot but understand that care for the situation of the poor and disadvantaged and making every effort to improve their situation is not a special interest of some politically biased Christians influenced by radical theologians. It is a central characteristic of the Christian understanding of God and of Christian life in its personal and political dimensions.

This fundamental perspective on life must also shape our view when we read the signs of the times.

### **Confronting the digital divides**

If the biblical option for the poor shapes our perception of reality, it directs our attention to the global divides in the face of digitization. As Henrik Simojoki has noted, discussions on global digital transformation are often characterized by “sweeping generalizations”. We speak of “the digital world” or “global digital transformation” or “the Net generation” or the much used word “digital natives”. Such generalizations suggest that participation in these digital developments is more or less general.<sup>2</sup>

The reality is that access is highly divided. Drawing on recent research Simojoki describes eight forms of digital divides: the income divide, the geographic divide, the ethnic divide, the education divide, the gender divide, the age divide, the technological divide, and the global divide.<sup>3</sup>

Use of the Internet is very different in numbers in different parts of the world. While the number of individuals using the Internet is high in the developed countries, it is – according to World Bank statistics – relatively low in less developed countries.<sup>4</sup> In Eritrea – to give just one example – only 1.2% of the population use the Internet while the number in Germany is 88.1%.

This digital divide has different dimensions. Of course, there is the simple dimension of material resources. Who has the money to buy a smart phone or even a tablet or a laptop? How can people pay for the data they need to use their smartphone? In Uganda, people spend on average about 15% of their monthly income for 1 GB of data. Popular services like Facebook, YouTube or WhatsApp turn – with their cost increased by taxes – into a luxury good for the poor.<sup>5</sup>

There is a gender gap. In Rwanda, globally the country with the highest percentage of women in parliament, 60% more men have access to the internet than women. There is also a gap between cities and rural areas. In less developed regions, it amounts to about 80%. In Tanzania it is 84%.<sup>6</sup>

In the last few years we have seen a shift in the causes of the global digital divide. While in former times the problem was primarily the lack of digital infrastructure, this infrastructure has developed more and more worldwide. This progress, however, has increased inequality even more, because

while some can use this infrastructure and participate in internet communication, others – often the majority – are excluded. Therefore, participation is not, strengthened but weakened – a phenomenon, which the Think Tank Research ICT Africa calls the “paradox of digital inequality on the African continent.”<sup>7</sup>

The consequences of these divides for the distribution of global attention, with all its effect on what is perceived as important or less important, are fundamental. Henrik Simojok describes the selectivity of perception with the example of the terrorist attack on the French journal *Charlie Hebdo* on 7 January 2015. “#JeSuisCharlie” became one of the most popular hashtags in the history of Twitter. Within 24 hours, more than 3.5 million people expressed their solidarity through this hashtag. And this can only be welcomed. Yet two days later, 2,000 people were massacred in Nigeria by Boko Haram. It was an act of incredible cruelty. However, it did not evoke an outcry in any way comparable to the one two days before.<sup>8</sup>

### **Connecting schools globally and digitally**

Let me make the theme of digital divide and strategies against it more concrete by introducing



13 September 2021, Berlin, Germany. International symposium on Social Justice in a Digital Age, co-organised by the World Council of Churches and the World Association for Christian Communication. Right: Bishop Heinrich Bedford-Strohm. PhotoByAlbinHillert\_AH2\_0419.jpg



a school-networking project which came out of the Reformation 500th anniversary celebrations and which has developed into a success story of global digital inclusion. Henrik Simojoki who – together with Annette Scheunpflug – was one of its initiators and promoters uses it as the life-world basis of his scholarly article on the digital divide.<sup>9</sup>

The project by the name “schools500reformation” with the internet platform “[schools500reformation.net](http://schools500reformation.net)” aimed to connect Protestant schools worldwide by digitally bringing together teachers, students, school principals and administrators in education. The goal was to bring together 500 schools, but soon 660 schools were already registered. The strongest concentration of schools did not come from Europe but from countries in Central Africa like the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Cameroon, and Tanzania. News was being shared; newsletters were distributed; learning materials were exchanged. An interactive forum was added where teachers and pupils from the participating schools could interact directly.

The digital divide between north and south that the project sought to bridge can be illustrated by the frequency of a school homepage. In Germany, it is standard that every school has a homepage of its own. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, from the more than 100 Protestant schools participating, only one had a homepage.

The project changed digital participation of the schools considerably. When all schools were asked to send in “Theses for the Future”, which teachers collected from students and then published globally, “Strikingly, the country that sent in the most theses was the Democratic Republic of Congo.”<sup>10</sup>

During the project, it became clear that digital exchange was not enough. Therefore, three regional conferences took place in Africa, which made face-to-face-exchange possible. And in the anniversary year, 80 principals from Protestant schools from Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, Latin and North America came together in Wittenberg to exchange their experiences.

I will always remember this conference as a visible experience of the one global church of Jesus Christ, connected beyond national, social, and cultural borders.

Despite the obvious success of the project, Simojoki’s conclusion is also conscious of the difficulties, “...In the so-called digital age, connecting people and bridging distances between the Global North and the Global South is still much more complicated and laborious than the popular idea of global connectivity would mislead us into believing.”<sup>11</sup>

### **Accessibility becomes a decisive factor**

The digital divide that we have looked at on a *global* scale is, of course, also an issue in *national* societies, and even in wealthy countries. Access to the digital world has turned from one among several dimensions of societal participation into the decisive form of societal participation. Lack of participation was, therefore, detrimental to human souls. This was especially evident for older people not familiar with digital communication and, therefore, often literally isolated from their normal communities. Often enough, what was sorrow at the beginning turned into tragedy, with people even dying of loneliness.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the harsh consequences of the digital divide also hit young people in a particular way. Over many months schooling had completely to switch into digital mode. In addition to the injustices of sharply differing levels of family support in home schooling during this time, the simple technical equipment differed. In poor families, children had to compete for the tablet or laptop if there was one in the family at all. Families who did not have the digital equipment had to pay a monthly fee for borrowing it, adding to an already strained daily budget.

The consequences of this digital divide during the pandemic will only become really visible in the future. But not much imagination is needed to conclude that the injustice in educational opportunities has been aggravated during this time.

In addition to the divide in *access* to the internet, which we call the “digital divide”, there is also a discussion about what I would call the “digitally *caused* divide”. Alexander Filipovic cites research showing that there is a “double spiral effect” that increases inequality. Those with good education profit from a sophisticated use of the internet with the result of deepening their education, advancing their social position and strengthening their social capital (upward spiral), while others with low education and a precarious socio-economic starting position do not profit from internet use comparably and are therefore further left out (downward spiral).<sup>12</sup>

Countering the dynamics of divides is one of the challenges of shaping digitization responsibly.

### **Overcoming monopolistic structures**

Digital justice is endangered also by monopolistic structures, caused by an extremely fast build-up of entrepreneurial power. The communication of billions of people is controlled by a handful of powerful companies. Google’s market share has constantly been above 90%,<sup>13</sup> with about two trillion yearly searches. Google’s next competitor, Bing, only holds 2.5% of market share, while Yahoo accounts for only 1.5%. Noah Yuval Harari has emphasized the power that comes from this market position: “Since we increasingly use Google when we look for answers our ability resists looking for information ourselves. Already today ‘truth’ is defined by the top results of the google search.”<sup>14</sup>

The number of Facebook users has constantly increased since 2008. As of the second quarter of 2020, Facebook had almost 2.9 billion monthly active users.<sup>15</sup> Every change in the Facebook algorithm has an impact on the communication behaviour of billions of people worldwide.

The growth in usage of AI technologies like machine-learning and deep-learning spreads the ability to sift through vast amounts of data and mine them for patterns and trends. Hence, companies sitting on a treasure trove of user data have new capabilities to use and commercialize it.

That means: big data players become even more powerful. As German theologian Peter Dabrock has noted, “Large data collectors like digital platforms with a massive user base and enormous amounts of daily traffic can merge various silos of data and create new products and services with a clear advantage compared to small start-up businesses that have yet to collect data from a far smaller user base.”

This creates a “winner-takes-all” logic and makes it much harder for start-ups to join once a strong incumbent has established itself. The long-term effects, according to Dabrock, are significant, “Since this logic rewards great size we are experiencing a situation of monopolization which has never existed before in the history of economics.”<sup>16</sup>

For the famous global investor George Soros, Google and Facebook are monopolists “who cultivate addiction, menace independent thinking and make state financed surveillance of their citizens possible for dictators.”<sup>17</sup>

How to counter such monopolistic tendencies is an important topic of ethical reflections on digital justice.

### **Making algorithms responsible. Re-establishing democratic discourse in digital communication**

The commercial logic of the digital economy and its powerful effect on personal and public communication threatens the very fabric of discourse so crucial for democratic societies. The fact that the internet is full of fake news and hate speech, full of conspiracy theories and extremist content, is no coincidence. It has a reason.

Studies say that – through their recommendations and algorithms – platforms like YouTube quickly attract users towards more extreme, even extremist content. The platforms do not assess the political content; they do not create their algorithms according to truth criteria or according to certain fundamental values, but simply according to potential advertisement revenue. If more extreme content generates the most financial revenue, the algorithms will push them, no mat-

ter how detrimental they might be to democratic culture or the promotion of human dignity.

If this is so, if algorithms really work like this, then platforms like YouTube or Facebook are the most powerful instruments in the 21st century for turning people into extremists. The fatal alliance of the extremist attitudes of some users and the economic interests of the platforms is endangering our democracies.

The exchange of argument is not the driving force but the logic of consumer preference. Algorithms serve the interest of profit not the pursuit of the common good. The consumer logic of pleasing and nudging the recipient becomes the paradigm for communication. Mutual affirmation in opinion-building in filter bubbles overtakes the sometimes quite unpleasant exchange of controversial arguments.

In his new book, Jaron Lanier, one of the pioneers of the digital revolution, recommends leaving the commercially driven social networks altogether, and proposes moving towards social networks which are not financed through advertising but through subscription fees. For him, this is the only way to prevent a culture of consumer idiots formed solely by commerce-driven communication culture.

A proposal which the former CEO of the German Public TV station ARD, Ulrich Wilhelm made, envisions an international publicly funded internet platform responsible not to shareholders expecting a certain financial output, but to commonly shared basic values such as the inviolability of human dignity. Such a platform could become an alternative to commercially driven internet platforms ignoring such basic moral values.

### **Becoming human in the digital age**

When we reflect theologically upon the Christian view on digital justice, two intrinsically connected aspects must play a central role: relationality and vulnerability. What it means to be a human being can only be understood for us as Christians, if we interpret it from the humanity of Jesus. In the words of 20th century Swiss theologian Karl

Barth, whoever “does not know and take into account from the very first place and from the very first view and word that the human being has a fellow human being, does not see him or her at all.”<sup>18</sup>

It is decisive for theological anthropology to understand how specific this Christological foundation is. It does not suffice to speak of some general humanity with some general relationality. Such humanity and such relationality are qualified. Jesus is the vulnerable human being, the tortured human being, the powerless, abused human being. Relationality, theologically understood, is therefore, always relationality from below.

That will have to be the starting point when we reflect upon this sentence, which will hopefully reach our hearts and minds as the motto on our way to the WCC’s Karlsruhe assembly in 2022: “Christ’s love moves the world to reconciliation and unity”. Our divided world needs our contribution as Christians. It needs our public witness.

As Christians we should be online wherever it can help to move the world to reconciliation and unity. But this digital presence is not an end in itself but only an instrument. We are not saying, “I am online, therefore I am”, but “I am in Christ, therefore I am.” And – honouring our relationality – even more precisely, “We are in Christ, therefore we are.” If this is true, then it is the most powerful expression of hope for this struggling world when we repeat, “Christ’s love moves the world to reconciliation and unity.” ■

#### **Notes**

1. Gesche Joost, No App, No Access, in: W. Beck/I. Nord/J. Valentin (eds.), *Theologie und Digitalität. Ein Kompendium*, Freiburg, 2021, 32-49 (37).
2. H. Simojoki, Falling Through the Net. The Digital Divide as a Challenge to Public Theology, Global Learning and Religious Education, in: M. Pirner/J. Lähnemann/W. Haussmann/S. Schwarz (eds.), *Public theology. Perspectives on Religion and Education*, Routledge: London/New York 2019, 199-210 (200f).
3. Joost. 203
4. <http://wdi.worldbank.org/table/5.12>
5. Gesche Joost, No App, No Access, in: W. Beck/I. Nord/J. Valentin (eds.), *Theologie und Digitalität. Ein Kompendium*, Freiburg, 2021, 32-49 (42).
6. Ibid.

7. Joost, 35.
8. Simojoki, 205.
9. Simojoki, 199f.
10. Simojoki, 207.
11. Simojoki, 208.
12. A. Filipovic, Ungleichheit in der vernetzten Gesellschaft. Der Zusammenhang zwischen Internetnutzung und sozialer Ungleichheit in medienethischer Perspektive, in: Marlies Prinzing et al. (Hgg.), *Neuvermessung der Medienethik. Bilanz, Themen und Herausforderungen seit 2000*, Beltz Juventa, Weinheim/Basel 2015, 206-221(215f).
13. <http://gs.statcounter.com/search-engine-market-share>
14. Yuval Noah Harari, *21 Lektionen für das 21. Jahrhundert*, München 2018, 87. Own Translation.
15. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/>
16. Peter Dabrock, "Suchet der Stadt Bestes," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 9 January 2019, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/die-gegenwart/datenschutz-und-menschenwuerde-suchet-der-stadt-bestes-15957346.html>
17. Precht, 250.
18. „Wer nicht zum vornherein, vom ersten Blick und Wort an weiß und in Rechnung zieht, daß der Mensch einen Nächsten hat, der sieht ihn gar nicht“ (K. Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik III/2*, Zürich 1948, (270f).

Heinrich Bedford-Strohm was born in 1960 and studied Theology in Erlangen, Heidelberg and Berkeley (USA). From 1989 to 1992 he was a teaching assistant at the Chair of Systematic Theology and Social Ethics at Heidelberg University where he earned his doctorate in 1992. In 1995 he accepted a Dietrich Bonhoeffer guest professorship for Social Ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York. In 1998 he was granted his "habilitation" (enabling eligibility for a full professorship) at Heidelberg University. From 1999 to 2001 he had an acting professorship for Systematic Theology at Giessen University. From 2004 to 2011 he was professor of Systematic Theology and Current Theological Issues. He headed the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Research Centre for Public Theology at Giessen University from 2007 to 2011 and was also dean of the Faculty of Humanities from 2006 to 2011. He is a member of the Society for Protestant Theology and is on the board of the journal *Evangelische Theologie*, having been its CEO until 2011. Since 30 October 2011 Bedford-Strohm has been bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria and since 11 November 2014 chair of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Deutschland.

# Bridging the gender digital divide from a human rights perspective

## Association for Progressive Communications

*The human rights implications of the gender digital divide are that women are excluded from participating fully in public and social life, and as such are unable to fully exercise their human rights, online and offline. The gender digital divide exacerbates existing inequality and perpetuates discrimination as ICTs become indispensable to others in society. Without meaningful internet access, women are not able to fully realise a range of human rights, whether civil and political rights – such as freedom of expression, to seek and impart information, to assemble and associate with others freely – or economic, social and cultural rights – such as to pursue their education online, seek health-related information, or find work and advance their economic well-being.*

It is important to note that even when women are able to access the internet affordably and have the skills to do so, they may not be fully able to use it to exercise their rights because of cultural norms, in particular, deeply rooted societal discrimination against women, and the policies and practices of states and the private sector. This is also part of the gender digital divide, and is critical to address in order to bridge the divide

from a human rights perspective.

## **Censorship**

When addressing the gender digital divide, it is critical to not just consider access for “who”, but access to “what”, in other words, content that is meaningful and empowering. If a woman does not see the value of using the internet, she will not take it on. The internet has become a critical space for women to access relevant information, which is often unavailable to them offline due to social and cultural norms – for example, information on sexual health and reproductive rights.

Yet increasingly, this information is being dubbed obscene and then censored online too. A human rights-based approach to bridging the gender digital divide requires ensuring that women have access to all information online, to make informed and vital choices about their lives and to fully exercise their rights enshrined by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). And at the same time, women also need public access spaces that are gender sensitive and able to provide guidance in accessing online content for them without fear or prejudice.

The private sector is playing an influential role in this regard. A recent report from UNESCO indicated that state policies, laws and regulations – to varying degrees – are inadequately aligned with the state’s duty to facilitate and support intermediaries’ respect for freedom of expression.<sup>1</sup> In fact, rather than fulfilling their obligations under the Ruggie Principles,<sup>2</sup> states often make it difficult or impossible for companies to respect human rights online by imposing legal and regulatory frameworks that are incompatible with the right to freedom of expression as defined under international human rights law. As a result, some states are effectively extending the restrictive environments for freedom of expression that exist offline to the online sphere by enlisting or coercing the private sector.

In addition, through their own terms of service and community guidelines, the private sector often takes measures that negatively im-

pact freedom of expression online and access to information beyond what is strictly required from them under law.<sup>3</sup> In both the cases of state regulation and the private sector’s own policies, information that is relevant and vital to women is restricted according to notions of obscenity and morality that are based on deeply entrenched societal views on women and their place in society.

As noted above, culture and norms act as a significant barrier to women’s expression online, often causing a chilling effect where women’s ability to express themselves online is concerned. In the words of one BPF respondent, referring to the situation in Kenya and the East African region in general, “Women are expected to act, dress, communicate in a certain way which is often determined by society, religion, culture among other things. This has caused a lot of women to censor their expression online to the extent that some prefer not to get online at all.”<sup>4</sup>

## **Violence against women online**

Acts of gender-based violence that are committed, abetted or aggravated, in part or fully, by the use of ICTs such as phones, the internet, social media platforms and email are violations of women’s fundamental human rights. They also act as a significant barrier to women’s use of the internet. Threats enabled by ICT use and threats pertaining to online abuse and violence were not explicitly listed in the survey as a separate barrier; however, many survey respondents highlighted this as a significant other barrier in the open-ended question pertaining to barriers. It was similarly noted as the third most important barrier to mobile phone ownership and usage and a key concern for women by the GSMA,<sup>5</sup> and highlighted as a “worrying new development” by the Broadband Commission Working Group on Broadband and Gender in 2013.<sup>6</sup>

APC’s own research has found that violence against women and girls online – such as cyberstalking, cyberbullying, harassment and misogynist speech – limits their ability to take advantage of the opportunities that ICTs provide for the full realisation of women’s human

rights, including freedom of expression.<sup>7</sup> Just as violence is used to silence, control and keep women out of public spaces offline, women's and girls' experiences online reflect the same pattern. Women human rights defenders face particular threats online, including cyberstalking, violation of privacy, censorship, and hacking of email accounts, mobile phones and other electronic devices, with a view to discrediting them and/or inciting other violations and abuses against them.

As a consequence, women and girls self-censor, reduce participation or withdraw from platforms and technology they are using all together. In addition, the normalisation of violent behaviour and the culture that tolerates violence against women that social media perpetuates and facilitates at rapid speed, work to reinforce sexist and violent attitudes, and contribute to norms and behaviour that make online spaces hostile towards women. Analysis of cases from APC's Take Back The Tech! mapping project<sup>8</sup> showed that the harms resulting from technology-related VAW include emotional or psychological harm, harm to reputation, physical harm, sexual harm, invasion of privacy, loss of identity, limitation of mobility, censorship, and loss of property.

APC's in-depth research in seven countries<sup>9</sup> found that national laws are not efficient and they fail to recognise the continuum of violence that women experience offline and online. In addition, police are less likely to record cases of poor and marginalised women facing technology-related VAW. As a result, a culture of impunity prevailed in the countries studied. The research found that access to the internet itself enables survivors of technology-related violence to claim their rights, without relying on the state. It is important to note that the ability to use the internet anonymously, which is often seen as a barrier in addressing online VAW in terms of identifying the perpetrator, is seen as an important tool for survivors who wish to re-enter online spaces with the possibility of avoiding a recurrence of violence.

Due to increased visibility of the issue, legislation has been emerging in a number of jurisdic-

tions to address online VAW. Some trends that APC identified from analysing four such pieces of legislation include the need to provide practical avenues of redress, such as protection orders, that were not previously cognisable within the criminal or civil law frameworks. Importantly, all of the legislation reviewed recognised that harm caused by harassment online includes emotional distress, even if there is no actual physical harm. The emerging legislation studied also reflects the increasing need for internet and communications intermediaries to play a role in preventing and rectifying online violence, harassment and bullying.<sup>10</sup>

Most legislation examined in the research did not impose criminal liability, which is undesirable from a freedom of expression perspective, but instead placed a burden on service providers to respond to requests for information about the identity of the harasser, to cease providing service upon the order of a court, and even to remove offensive content when service providers become aware of its presence on their sites.

A number of freedom of expression concerns have emerged in the legislation studied. In Nova Scotia, these concerns related to the broad powers of a court to prevent internet access or confiscate technologies; in California, initial opposition to the amendment resulted in a considerable narrowing of the offence to apply only where there was an agreement between parties that the image was to remain private. The free expression implications are perhaps the most significant in the case of New Zealand – the proposed legislation seeks to “civilise” online communications by preventing, for example, grossly offensive, indecent or obscene digital expression. In doing so, the legislation seeks to apply different standards to online communication and expression than to offline communication and expression.

On one hand, the legislation recognises the unique nature of digital communications – the speed with which they are promulgated and proliferate, the inability to permanently erase them, and the insulating nature of anonymous communications that can promote offensive or

violent behaviour. The fact that the potential for harm can be attributed differently to digital technologies than offline speech is seen as a basis for treating electronic communications differently. On the other hand, however, the legislation also applies a number of subjective and general standards to all digital communications, which, depending on a court's interpretation, could be applied in ways that limit free expression and could undermine the free flow of information.

Aside from the risk of overly broad limitations on freedom of expression, some authorities respond to online VAW by seeking to limit women's access to the internet. Recent research from the Internet Democracy Project in India examines the practice of some local councils (or Punjارات) that have banned mobile phone usage by young and/or unmarried women on the basis that women and girls need to be protected from online abuse.<sup>11</sup> The fact that there is a generalised perception of threat pertaining to the internet therefore tends to be used as an excuse for preventing women and girls from accessing the internet in the country.

A dimension of VAW that is particularly relevant in relation to efforts to bridge the gender digital divide, although it does not take place through ICTs, relates to the challenges faced by women in rural areas. They may find the internet especially difficult to access, particularly in areas where access is only available outside the home or in unsafe locations, and/or where social or cultural norms and safety concerns may restrict women's freedom of movement.

Some positive common elements that emerged from APC's research on legislation include: the use of a consultative process in designing the legislation; utilising/amending existing legal frameworks vs. creating new laws; focus on redress over criminalisation, which seems to be the most effective, efficient and meaningful way of aiding victims of violence online and ensuring that justice is achieved; the use of protection orders to address online VAW, which provide a practical means of halting violence without requiring victims to become embroiled in lengthy

and demanding criminal processes; and creating a dedicated agency to receive and investigate complaints. ■

*Excerpted from "Bridging the gender digital divide from a human rights perspective: APC submission to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights." Association for Progressive Communications (APC). February 2017.*

#### Notes

1. UNESCO. (2015). *Fostering Freedom Online: The Role of Internet Intermediaries*. [unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002311/231162e.pdf](https://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002311/231162e.pdf)
2. UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. [www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/GuidingPrinciplesBusinessHR\\_EN.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/GuidingPrinciplesBusinessHR_EN.pdf)
3. Agence France-Presse. (2016, 20 October). Facebook bans "offensive" Swedish breast cancer awareness video. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/oct/20/facebook-bans-swedish-breast-cancer-awarenessvideo-for-being-offensive>
4. Sylvia Musalagani (Kenya), quoted in Van der Spuy, A. (2016). *Overcoming Barriers to Enable Women's Meaningful Internet Access*. Output document –IGF Best Practice Forum on Gender. [www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/index.php?q=filedepot\\_download/3406/437](http://www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/index.php?q=filedepot_download/3406/437)
5. GSMA. (2015). *Bridging the Gender Gap: Mobile access and usage in low- and middle-income countries*. [www.gsma.com/connectedwomen/wpcontent/uploads/2015/02/GSM0001\\_02252015\\_GSMAReport\\_FINAL-WEBSpreads.pdf](http://www.gsma.com/connectedwomen/wpcontent/uploads/2015/02/GSM0001_02252015_GSMAReport_FINAL-WEBSpreads.pdf)
6. Broadband Commission Working Group on Broadband and Gender. (2013). *Doubling Digital Opportunities: Enhancing the Inclusion of Women & Girls in the Information Society*. [www.broadbandcommission.org/documents/working-groups/bb-doubling-digital-2013.pdf](http://www.broadbandcommission.org/documents/working-groups/bb-doubling-digital-2013.pdf)
7. [genderit.org/onlinevaw](http://genderit.org/onlinevaw)
8. <https://www.takebackthetech.net/mapit>
9. The research consisted of mapping domestic legal remedies through literature review and conducting in-depth interviews to gather women's and girls' experiences of accessing justice and compiling case studies in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Mexico, Pakistan and the Philippines. See: [www.genderit.org/sites/default/upload/flow\\_domestic\\_legal\\_remedies.pdf](http://www.genderit.org/sites/default/upload/flow_domestic_legal_remedies.pdf)
10. Nyst, C. (2014). *Technology-related violence against women: Recent legislative trends*. Association for Progressive Communications. [www.genderit.org/sites/default/upload/flowresearch\\_cnyst\\_legtrend\\_in.pdf](http://www.genderit.org/sites/default/upload/flowresearch_cnyst_legtrend_in.pdf)
11. Kovacs, A. (2017). "Chupke, Chupke": *Going Behind the Mobile Phone Bans in North India*. Internet Democracy Project. [https://genderingsurveillance.internetdemocracy.in/phone\\_ban](https://genderingsurveillance.internetdemocracy.in/phone_ban)

# In what ways has the digital era changed the notion of public space?

## Working Group

*An international working group prepared the following paper for the symposium on “Communication for Social Justice in the Digital Age”, which took place in Berlin and online September 13–15, 2021. It sets out an understanding of public space today, outlines what issues are at stake, and proposes a number of measures aimed at restoring openness and accountability.*

The US-based Project for Public Spaces after “evaluating thousands of public spaces around the world”, defined four characteristics of a successful physical public space. “They are *accessible*; people are engaged in *activities* there; the space is *comfortable* and has a good image; and finally, it is a *sociable* place: one where people meet each other and take people when they come to visit.”

The coalition PublicSpaces (2021) holds that a public *digital* space should be *open, transparent, accountable, sovereign* and *user-centric*, which focuses less on how citizens use the space than on its governance and how it is experienced. Each of these nine characteristics can be mapped onto public communication spaces, both digital and analogue, and this paper considers how and why these elements are enabled, curtailed or strengthened in the digital era.

Key to those understandings of public space is the idea that space is explicitly produced by social and political forces, and can be

produced differently by changing, redirecting or limiting those influences (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 26). Acknowledging that spaces are constructed through power dynamics leads Lefebvre to state there “is a politics of space because space is political” (cited in Elden, 2007, p. 107). Our examination of public communication spaces is framed by this understanding of spaces as socially constructed, politically powerful entities.

Another vital concept is that of the “public sphere”, where the state and society openly communicate, with citizens able to express their ideas and discuss theories and practices which impact on the common good (Habermas, 2006 [1989]). Scholars have since amplified Habermas’ concept from its upper-middle-class roots to recognise the participation of diverse non-traditional groups within the centralised public sphere, or within “counter” or “little” public spheres that unite smaller communities (Fraser, 1990; Hickey-Moody, 2016).

Habermas’ public sphere is intimately linked to public space, digital or otherwise. Yet it is essential that we clearly distinguish between the “public sphere” and “public space(s)”. We understand that the public sphere is linked to political discourse and related actions, and that it is merely one of many overlapping, interrelated kinds of public space which can address sundry topics, ideas, and areas of life.

## Voice poverty

For an individual, group, or community to participate fully in a public communication space, their voice must be enabled. Nick Couldry emphasises that voice is a crucial democratic tool in the face of the prevailing neoliberal political structure, and recognises it as a value to be embodied in individuals, projects, and policies, and an active process through which speakers “give an account of themselves and of their place in the world” (2010, p. 1).

When people experience “the denial of the right of people to influence the decisions that affect their lives, and the right to participate in that decision making”, this is termed “voice poverty”



Melania Itto, the program manager of Radio Bakhita, hosts the morning “Juba Sunrise” program in the station’s studio in Juba, the capital of Southern Sudan. NOTE: In July 2011 Southern Sudan became the independent country of South Sudan. Photo: Paul Jeffrey.



(Tacchi, 2008). This has historically been the case for groups excluded by material poverty, lack of education, disability or gender (among many other life circumstances and identity categories). Voice poverty continues to impact disproportionately minoritised groups, despite the unifying force of shared identities in our networked communities (Castells, 2010).

The struggle for citizens to take their rightful place in communicating their needs, ideas and decisions has long been the focus of the communication rights movement, of which WACC has been a part for over five decades (see Thomas, 2006). At the UN World Summits on the Information Society (WSIS), held in Geneva in 2003 and Tunis in 2005, debates around “the information society” (which had been developing since the 1970s) crossed paths with discourses around global access to communication, epitomised by the UNESCO MacBride Report (International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems, 2004 [1980]).

The MacBride Report gave a framework to the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) that emphasised communication rights for the non-western world (Ó Siochrú, 2004). Once the WSIS process was announced, the Communication Rights in the Information Society (CRIS) Campaign was launched with the aim of bringing civil society voices together – despite members’ scepticism at the WSIS’s paradigm in clear support of “the neoliberal globalization of ICTs” (Communica-

tion rights in the information society: The CRIS campaign, 2002; Ó Siochrú, 2004, p. 209).

Despite this and the limitations of civil actors’ participation, CRIS’s work (including that of WACC) was invaluable in raising significant global issues and in establishing a broad, united, transnational agenda for communication rights (Mueller, Kuerbis, & Pagé, 2007; Ó Siochrú, 2004; Thomas, 2006; WSIS Civil Society, 2005).

The CRIS Campaign trained and influenced campaigners worldwide and in the same spirit other important communiqués around communication rights have since been released. We particularly note the 2014 *Delhi Declaration for a Just and Equitable Internet* (Just Net Coalition, 2014) which led to the Digital Justice Manifesto, released in 2019 and entitled *A Call to Own Our Digital Future* (WACC, 2020), as well as the important *Feminist Principles of the Internet* (2016) which continues to be translated and disseminated.

These three statements share a marked focus on the perspectives, rights and needs of historically excluded groups, such as women, linguistic minorities, Indigenous nations and residents of the Global South. Each continues to resonate within the communication rights movement, although we note ruefully that the United Nations’

proposed *Declaration of Digital Independence* from 2019 (UN Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation, 2019) has not gained a foothold and its associated website is no longer active as of September 2021.

We also note that the Assembly of the World Council of Churches has focused on the issue of communications three times: in Uppsala (1968), Vancouver (1983), and most recently in Busan, South Korea (2012), where it considered the *Busan Communication Statement* produced in a prior process of consultation (World Council of Churches, 2012). That statement was aimed at “reclaiming communication for life, justice and peace”, and recognises that – through the lens of Christian faith – we can identify and name the unjust and domineering communication systems that are integrated into our lives. By means of prophetic communication, we can work to confront, challenge and transform power structures with our commitment to justice, dignity and equity for all.

When considered through the eyes of faith, the increasingly powerful media and communications corporations, infrastructures, and systems can be considered as “Principalities”, “Authorities”, “Regencies” or “Dominions” operating in “our time of globalization” (Stackhouse, 2001, pp. 73, 74). We can also recognise that these media

forces are “demonic’ in the sense that they grab and possess people and are in need not only of counter-forces but of fundamental conversion” (p. 74).

Their imposed universality also creates “a common ‘world’, which offers the basis for common discourse, the common good, and a ‘public theology’ on social, ethical and other issues” (D’Costa, 2005, p. 83), through which faith communities can contribute to reassessing and realigning these public communication spheres for the faithful and unfaithful alike. For the former, Hainsworth (2010) considers that public theology, which has long roots but new opportunities when channelled through online technologies, can “equip [faith community] members for faithful deliberation” and allow them to “recognise and respond to the changed landscape of proclamation and communication” (pp. 223, 225). According to theologian and sociologist Jacques Ellul (1980), we are living within a global technological system that has assumed the character of a sacred force, calling forth awe and veneration.

Today, the climate emergency is exposing how dangerously that worship threatens our planet. The technological system as a whole must be *de-sacralised* and re-oriented towards the common good. In this sense, the practice of public theology is vital to responding to the challenges posed by the technological and communication environment in which we all live.

### **Democratic public communication spaces**

The Working Group would like to share both a definition and a description of “digital public communication spaces” with the aim of articulating a clear, shared vision for the

14 September 2021, Berlin, Germany: International symposium on Social Justice in a Digital Age is held in Berlin, Germany. Co-organised by the World Council of Churches and World Association for Christian Communication. Caught on camera: Dennis Smith, Presbyterian Church USA. Photo: Albin Hillert.



spaces where we communicate our lives, our needs, and our dreams as human beings. The definition we arrived at is:

“Democratic public communication spaces are spaces for considered dialogue – both analogue and digital – that would explicitly strengthen excluded voices; guarantee citizens the right to own and control their data, information and knowledge, free from commercial, state or other co-option; and contribute to, uphold and validate social justice, communication rights and the common good.”

In these spaces, citizens would have equal access to data, information, knowledge and opportunities for exploring and understanding expert insights. This would be based on minimum guaranteed access to cost-free or affordable media, information and literacy training (formal and informal); analogue, digital, and on-line systems; software and hardware; connectivity, bandwidth and networks; and sustainable energy sources for their communication technology.

The current primacy of online spaces must not be allowed to override the many existing and necessary forms of analogue communication and connection, including radio, theatre, music and public art. We also recognise the vital role of public theology and faith communities in ensuring that the core ideas behind democratic public communication spaces are taught, sustained and made manifest.

Citizens' access to these communication resources would be appropriately protected from threats to privacy and security, or processes of exploitation, surveillance, capture or domination by state, private or other actors. This must be undergirded by strong legislative and regulatory frameworks devised through strong, diverse stakeholder consultations and which ensure accountability and transparency at a local, regional, national and international level.

Locally created, community-managed materials and media would be legally safeguarded, encouraged and appropriately resourced, and

citizens would be encouraged and trained to create, co-design, innovate and localise content and technologies to suit their needs. Public communication spaces would safeguard knowledge and data commons that operate independently and/or in relationship with private- and government-owned communication spaces.

While citizens would be invited to actively listen and generously share their knowledge, ideas and opinions – in a spirit of self-reflective, openhearted, constructive dialogue – legislation and regulation would rigorously protect the shared communication space from hate speech and misinformation, and the victimisation and delegitimization of contributors and contributions.

Clear, accessible mechanisms for complaint and redress will help protect citizens from abuse and threats in these spaces. The openness of a democratic public communication space would allow citizens to develop and disseminate their critiques of existing governance, communication and media, as well as making it possible for them to influence governments' positions in global/regional governance arenas on communication, media, data, artificial intelligence (AI) and communication issues.

Specific measures would need to be enacted to ensure the full, free and fair participation and voice of historically excluded groups, which should be guaranteed to them on their own terms. These individuals and communities include women, people living with disabilities, gender and/or sexually diverse people, lower-caste and lower-class groups, marginalised races and ethnicities, and those living in minoritised languages and cultures. The representation, vibrancy and expression of living languages and cultures – in their full breadth and diversity – must be maintained and strengthened.

### **What is at stake**

We live in a world in which public spaces, including democratic public communication spaces, are methodically side-lined, suppressed or eliminated in order to advance global corporate agendas



*Pat Ward, the director of the XYZ Senior Center in Nome, Alaska, helps Gabriel Payanna use a computer in the center, part of the United Methodist Women-supported Nome Community Center. Photo: Paul Jeffrey.*

and overweening state control (Deibert, 2020). This is in line with the current embedded dominance of neoliberal economic and governance systems that have been disseminated by the Global North and imposed on the Global South, and operate as the dominant powers behind, beneath and around our “public” spheres (Couldry et al., 2018).

Our current system is packaged in the wrappings of bourgeois individualism – which lauds the primacy of consumer choice and self-fulfilment over all other goals. As humans, as citizens, we are being forcibly reconfigured as passive subjects and systematically divided from our communities of purpose, faith, and daily living. Our ability to dream of a common good, and to join hands and voices to bring it into existence, is being placed beyond our reach by seemingly invulnerable corporate and state interests.

The pace at which change is occurring denies us the luxury of consideration, assessment and negotiation, and vital decisions about our well-being and our communication spaces are wrested from our control before we and our elected leaders know they exist. These are not minor issues.

Both North and South, the domination of global internet powers like Google, Apple, Facebook, Tencent, and Weibo remains all but un-

restricted, an ever-more powerful group of actors who remain unaccountable to the rule of law (national and international), taxes and users, even despite initiatives like Europe’s General Data Protection Regulation. This is merely the digital phase of decades of media convergence in the hands of fewer owners and power holders, which is now expressed through digital

platforms that control and coerce our media consumption, our information access, and many of our private affairs (Wu, 2016).

Consider Facebook’s shutdown of Australia’s news (and other) sites in protest at the nation’s News Media Bargaining Code (MEAA, 2021), TikTok’s algorithms which can identify if a 13-year-old is interested in racist content within four hours (and then supply it to them) (Dias, McGregor, & Day, 2021), or Google’s specific purchase of YouTube in 2006 to capture audiences for its advertisers (Zuboff, 2019).

This system has been termed “surveillance capitalism” (Zuboff, 2019), where the spaces and interactions of civil society are routinely violated, co-opted and commercialised “to turn all human lives and relations into inputs for the generation of profit. Human experience, potentially every layer and aspect of it, is becoming the target of profitable extraction” (Couldry & Mejias, 2019, p. 4).

The excesses of state intervention in purportedly public spaces are demonstrated through at least 10 governments’ use of the Pegasus spyware tool against journalists and citizens (OC-CRP, 2021; Priest, Timberg, & Mekhennet, 2021) and China’s embrace of surveillance to the point that “cameras perch on every street corner

and bots monitor every corner of the internet” (Ivanescu & Carlson, 2021; Mitchell & Diamond, 2018).

China had 770,000 surveillance cameras in late 2019, a number expected to reach 1 billion by the end of 2021 (Lin & Purnell, 2019), and there are credible fears it will capitalise on Covid protection measures to further embed and expand its surveillance regime (Bernot, Trauth-Goik, & Trevaskes, 2021). In China, as elsewhere, the results of this surveillance are then sometimes converted to censorship and political repression of citizens, journalists, and web users (Xu & Albert, 2017). It is a situation where media is so dominated by state-run outlets that China is ranked at 177 out of 180 countries for press freedom (Couldry et al., 2018; Reporters Without Borders, 2021).

This dramatic overreach into citizens’ public and private spaces, and the data mined from them in every digital interaction, is a manifestation of what Couldry and Mejias (2019) call “data colonization”, where data is used to control and capture human life. In both the commercial and the state contexts, data is now considered the world’s most valuable commodity – akin, in fact, to oil (“Regulating the internet giants: The world’s most valuable resource is no longer oil, but data”, 2017).

Furthermore, corporations and states are increasingly collaborating to implement data-rich technologies – automation, artificial intelligence and algorithms – to manage and implement what have previously been key social services that operate in our public spaces. US judges are using the Compas AI program to predict whether prisoners seeking probation will reoffend upon release, and sentencing them according to Compas’ guidance despite the system lacking all transparency (Smith, 2019).

Virginia Eubanks (2018), also in the US, has examined how AI, developed from biased programming and data sources, reinforces inequality within automated welfare systems. Similar processes are also widely documented in medicine, e.g. systematically misjudging the illness of Black

patients in the US (Obermeyer, Powers, Vogeli, & Mullainathan, 2019), and in education, e.g. an Ofqual algorithm wrongly grading 40% of British A-level students (Kolkman, 2020).

### **Lack of transparency and accountability**

What is common to these state, commercial and hybrid systems is their near-absolute impunity, their lack of transparency, accountability and responsibility to citizens, taxpayers, users and individuals worldwide. What is also common is our inability to avoid what has become universalised, baked into every interaction offered to us on a digital platter and in digitally monitored physical spaces. As citizens, we cannot choose to opt out of this level of control, and we are failed by the existing systems of governance at national, international and transnational levels when they are “most directly responsive to the asserted needs of private entities” (Couldry et al., 2018, p. 22) than they are to citizens demanding their communication rights.

It is vital that the international communications infrastructure, especially online, is appropriately controlled because “the power of private actors, mainly tech giants, to determine the protection of human rights and shape democratic values on a global scale is mediated via the network’s architecture” (De Gregorio & Radu, 2020, para. 18). One such proposal is a Digital Stability Board (DSB), to respond to existing governance that is “ad hoc, incomplete and insufficient” (Fay, 2019, para. 2).

Another hybrid to beware is the alliance between political parties, fundamentalist groups, and repressive forms of communication which thrive in online environments, such as disinformation, misinformation, and hate speech. Following a definition by WACC’s Latin American Regional Association, fundamentalisms – in their diversity – each cleave unconditionally to a truth, expressed through the literal interpretation of a religious, political or economic text or discourse; they flee ambiguity and unconditionally accept authoritarian leadership (Pérez Vela, 2006, p. 12). Such alliances are growing worldwide, especially

among certain sectors of Buddhism, Islam, and Hinduism.

A recent study by Magali Cunha (2020) focused on fundamentalist religious groups, including Catholic and Neopentecostal groups among others, in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia and Peru. Cunha traced the connections between online actions of those groups and extremist politicians and policies gaining ascendancy in the national democratic sphere. These actions included extensive online disinformation and hate speech campaigns against other parties and beliefs, reaching levels of regional coordination (as in the case of the “Don’t Mess with My Children” campaign which began in Peru and spread online to six other Latin American nations) and impacting electoral results in Brazil, assisting in Jair Bolsonaro’s election to the presidency. Such dramatic online positions are, however, rewarded by social media algorithms that prioritise extreme views and thus contribute to increasing polarisation on- and offline (Aral, 2020).

The spread of misinformation by some Latin American religious groups is also having a public health impact in the global Covid pandemic, with BBC Mundo finding that 5% of the most popular anti-vaccine posts on Spanish-language Facebook were primarily by self-identified evangelicals (Equipo de Periodismo Visual de BBC Mundo, 2021). Faith communities in South America are, however, generating considered responses to these totalising movements and discourses. One is [Resistência Reformada](#) in Brazil, which engages its online communities in discussions and workshops to support democracy, and [Comunidad Teológica Ecuμένηca](#) in Chile, which uses its social media platforms to develop conversations around options for Chile’s new constitution.

### **What does the injustice look like?**

Fighting inequality is fundamental to the 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, n.d.), which “embraced ‘leaving no one behind’ as the cardinal principle to guide all sustainable development efforts at lo-

cal, national, regional and global levels” (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), 2019, p. 2). The goal related to communication, SDG 9.c, was so urgent that it was due for completion by 2020, not 2030: “Significantly increase access to information and communications technology and strive to provide universal and affordable access to the Internet in least developed countries by 2020” (Ritchie & Mispy, 2020). The goal is fuzzy (“significantly increase”) and in September 2021 it was unclear whether it had been met or not: we don’t know who has been left behind by this measure.

What is clear is that with internet access or not, there are many other inequalities in our technology and communication systems. A central driver of exclusion and marginalisation is the absence of digital, economic, political and social justice in the available communication spaces, digital or otherwise. This has been spotlighted during the Covid crisis, even in the world’s wealthiest nations like the United Kingdom (Ong, 2021).

Issues to be addressed include the many manifestations and instances around the worsening digital divide; the absence of meaningful access for all to tools, technologies and platforms; and the dominant mystification and elitism around communication governance, infrastructures and techniques (Couldry et al., 2018; UN Secretary-General’s High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation (UNSG), 2019; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), 2021).

Another social cause of exclusion online is the shamefully global, constant and destructive harassment of women, girls and minority groups online (especially women of colour and Black women), be they journalists, politicians, activists or women whose situation of domestic violence has moved into the digital sphere (APC, 2020; Civicus, 2021; El Asmar, 2020; Kakande et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2019). This kind of bullying and exclusion has a chilling effect on women and girls’ participation in the digital communication sphere, and the failure of media platforms to re-

spond effectively and rigorously to such systematic violence further limits safe spaces for public participation (Azelmat, 2021).

### Loss of language and culture

The catastrophic loss of languages and cultures in modern times can be traced back to the dawn of European colonialism in the 16th century and the many nations and tongues which fell in its path. This is epitomised by the official languages of the United Nations (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish), which mostly gained their current dominion through “discovery” and globalisation. Today, although Ethnologue (2021) counts 7,139 living languages across the globe, over 40% are endangered and over 240 have become extinct in the last 70 years (UNESCO, 2016). UNESCO also reports that most endangered languages on its records have populations smaller than 100,000, the minimum number believed necessary to ensure intergenerational transmission; 76% of those languages have fewer than 10,000 speakers, making their chances of survival and regeneration slim indeed.

Michael Krauss’ (1992) dire prediction that 90% of the world’s languages would fall silent before 2100 is all too likely to be accurate. Every single one of those languages holds within it hundreds or thousands of years of the culture, history, stories, wisdom and lifeways of its community and its sustainable relationship with

the earth. Too many languages, communities and connections have been eliminated by other “killer languages” (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2003) like the one you’re reading now.

This rapid negation of linguistic and cultural diversity is being ably supported by the internet: only 7% of the world’s language appear online (Bouterse, Sengupta, Allman, & Pozo, 2018). Of the content available in the top 10 million websites, 60.4% are in English with, in second place, 8.5% in Russian. The 20th language, Ukrainian, provides only 0.4% of web content (Bhutada, 2021). In terms of the primary language of internet users, English again dominates with 25.9%, with Chinese [sic – presumably Mandarin] second at 19.4%. Almost 77% of users operate speak one of just 10 languages (Statista, 2021). Minority and oral languages are especially liable to exclusion, as are those written in a script other than the Latin one used in most European languages, although some revitalised languages are thriving in online communities (e.g. Cornish) (DiSanto, 2019; Trancozo Trevino, 2020).

The potential for digital spaces to maintain or reawaken sleeping languages is disputed. On the one hand, many Indigenous communities have taken advantage of the internet to protect their languages, with or without support or funding from government, philanthropists and NGOs (“Indigenous languages in the internet age: How for-profit and non-profits alike help the Americas’ languages go digital”, 2019; Whose Knowledge?, 2019). On the other, many communities are being aggressively funnelled into online language maintenance by those same entities, against the wishes of speakers who want to prioritise the vitality of their languages in physical, human spaces (Bird, 2020). Such real-life linguistic encounters are the



*Cecilia Aguinaldo talks to her family back in the Philippines from her bed in a Hong Kong shelter run by Bethune House. The ministry supports women who have suffered abuse or have other problems with their employment. There are about 370,000 foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong—about 5 percent of the population—almost all from Indonesia and the Philippines. More than 98 percent of the workers are women, most of whom leave their families behind so that they can earn money to help their families survive. Photo: Paul Jeffrey.*

aim of organisations like [Language Party](#), which hosts in-person story-telling events in the many languages of local communities – Indigenous, settler, migrant and refugee.

The push for digital language protection is just one manifestation of the prevailing technological determinism embodied in our communications infrastructures. Ramesh Srinivasan criticises the genericising term “the last billion”, for example, used to describe those who are not connected to the internet and mobile-phone technologies, which was coined by Google cofounder Larry Page and Nicholas Negroponte of the MIT Media Laboratory and One Laptop Per Child project.

Srinivasan states, “Perniciously, it implies that the indigenous peoples of the Andes or the herds-people of the Kalahari desert simply cannot wait to receive the blessings of Western technology” (Srinivasan, 2017, p. 4). Rather than individualising those one billion humans, or consulting them as to what their technological and communication needs might be, “the last billion” exemplifies their status as passive subjects in a global digital autocracy.

### **What can be done**

A clear contrast to techno-determinism is the work of the Shifting the Power Coalition and its program Pacific Young Women Transforming Climate Crisis to Climate Justice. This program is designed to train emerging women leaders from six Pacific Nations to communicate their needs and perspectives concerning the dramatic climate crisis facing the Pacific. Rather than funders or project managers imposing communication technologies on participants, 90 young women were surveyed to discover the media and platforms that would best enable them to participate and innovate. These included a combination of traditional and new media which are adaptable across a diversity of island nations – phone-based social media, radio broadcasts, comic books and community media (Shifting the Power Coalition, 2021) – underlining that social media are not universally destructive, however tempting that

analysis might be.

Another key issue is the decreasing power and presence of public broadcasters and public interest media worldwide, typically established to help “societies be well-informed, politically engaged and socially cohesive” (Gardner, 2018, p. 3). Their decline is one reason for the dearth of quality information and vital knowledge available to ordinary citizens and audiences. Former Wikipedia executive Sue Gardner (2018) reports that public broadcasters, such as the BBC, CBC, ABC, RTE and PBS, produce more news, politics and public affairs information – and present it in a less-sensationalist and more-balanced way – than equivalent commercial broadcasters. Individuals who consume public broadcaster news are likelier to vote, better informed, more likely to have realistic perceptions of social issues and less likely to express negatives about immigrants and immigration. Nations that fund their public broadcasters appropriately also “have higher levels of social trust, and the people who live in them are less likely to hold extremist political views” (pp. 6-7).

If we want communities to benefit from quality information and stronger connections, it is important that funding models are revitalised and strengthened, perhaps through appropriate public subsidies (Deane, 2021) or global support such as the [International Fund for Public Interest Media](#). In tandem, communications infrastructure must also be publicly owned to ensure autonomy from private commercial interests (Pariser & Allen, 2021).

In addition to publicly owned communications infrastructure, community-managed infrastructure must be funded, legislated for and supported at a national and local level. A recent ground-breaking example is the Roberto Arias Connectivity Program which was launched in Argentina in June 2021, whose aim is “build and deploy community networks in different regions of the country that still lack connectivity a whole 25 years after internet service was first introduced in Argentina” (AlterMundi, 2021). The program is the result of three years’ advocacy by



community organisations and has led to policy and financial support for basic communication rights. However, it has since been halted by legal appeals by telecommunications companies defending their domination and profits.

While [AlterMundi](#) focuses on internet connectivity on the principles of community, freedom and decentralisation, [Rhizomatica](#) does similar work in Mexico with a focus on autonomous GSM networks and digital HF networks.

This rare allocation of funds in Argentina serves as a counterpoint to the almost universal dearth of financing for programs that enable social change. It must be carefully researched, participatively designed, collaboratively developed and autonomously rolled out, managed and monitored (as far as possible), in order to ensure that sustainable, high-quality outcomes are achieved.

A key response to the systemic exclusions of the dominant communications paradigm is training in media production and media and information literacy (again, analogue, digital and online). Formal and informal community-based education help develop a populace which has ownership of its voice, its message and its means of communication. This is valid in every country, on every continent.

[Milpa Digital](#) in Costa Rica produces digital and print comics to skill up rural populations. [Free/Dem](#) in India introduces women in poor urban areas to mobile-based communications and practices. [Digital Safe-Tea](#) in Uganda and Nigeria has gamified online security training for women and [Stiftung Neue Verantwortung](#) in Germany provides information on digital news literacy as part of its work to strengthen the digital sphere.

Beyond learning to interpret media, citizens must have access to training in media production and distribution, as the not-for-profit [Near Media Co-operative](#) does in Ireland. Near trains volunteers to produce and participate in community radio, TV and podcasting. And organisations like [Tactical Tech](#) in Germany offer skills in data, security and “digital detoxing”.

## Recommendations

We value the comprehensive and detailed recommendations, action plan and tool kit which appear in *Inequality and Communicative Struggles in Digital times* (Couldry et al., 2018), and the careful recommendations in *The Age of Digital Interdependence* (UN Secretary-General’s High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation (UNSG), 2019). Readers may also find useful *The Montreal Declaration for Responsible AI Development* (2017), *The Public Service Media and Public Service Internet Manifesto* (Fuchs & Unterberger, 2021) and Appendix 2 in van der Waal et al. (2020), which lists the values held by independent online initiatives in relation to digital public spaces.

We have condensed our most urgent recommendations into the following and we trust they will support democratic public communication spaces to thrive, be they on- or offline. Bearing in mind the definitions of public space provided in the introduction, these recommendations can assist in creating spaces that are open, accessible, comfortable and sociable. Activities can be engaged in safely and within the users’ control, and with luck, users can participate in a space whose governance is transparent, accountable and sovereign to the users.

### *Ethical and theoretical*

- \* Ensure justice, equity, equality: content, languages, cultures, forms, channels, platforms, devices...
- \* Guarantee affordable access to autonomous, local, democratically controlled media production and dissemination
- \* Prioritise voices/spaces of those who have traditionally been excluded, isolated or neglected in media, communication and political ecosystems

### *Political*

- \* Create civil and faith-based communities of resistance to the neoliberal, consumerist ideology which enables current media ecosystems to thrive
- \* Build widespread, global coalitions of inter-

est – transparent, participatory, collaborative  
– to expand the public sphere, between digital and analogue industries, civil society and inter/governmental bodies

### Educational

- \* Build awareness of the complex nature – both positive and negative – of the digital “public” sphere and digital “public” spaces
- \* Develop communication skills: Dialogue, conversation, negotiation, listening, openness to contrary opinions
- \* Ensure availability of low-cost or cost-free media, information and digital literacy training

### Technical

- \* Ensure meaningful access to affordable, quality devices, technology, systems and networks
- \* Normalise open, interoperable data, software, hardware, platforms and standards
- \* Support and encourage open source, creative commons and culturally appropriate, shared ownership of information and knowledge. ■

*This document was compiled by Jodie Lea Martire, (ORCID ID 0000-0002-8997-8755), writer, editor, translator, and researcher based in Brisbane, Australia, following a series of online conversations with a team of communication rights practitioners worldwide.*

### References

- AlterMundi. (2021, September 3). A groundbreaking government programme opens the way for community-based connectivity in Argentina. *APC*. Retrieved from <https://www.apc.org/en/blog/groundbreaking-government-programme-opens-way-community-based-connectivity-argentina>
- APC (Association for Progressive Communications). (2020, September 4). Submission to the UN Special Rapporteur: Online gender-based violence in the context of COVID-19. *GenderIT.org*. Retrieved from <https://genderit.org/resources/submission-un-special-rapporteur-online-gender-based-violence-context-covid-19>
- Aral, S. (2020). *The Hype Machine: How Social Media Disrupts Our Elections, Our Economy, and Our Health—and How We Must Adapt*. London: HarperCollins.
- Azelmat, M. (2021, August 17). Can social media platforms tackle online violence without structural change? *GenderIT.org*. Retrieved from [https://www.genderit.org/feminist-talk/can-social-media-platforms-tackle-online-violence-](https://www.genderit.org/feminist-talk/can-social-media-platforms-tackle-online-violence-without-structural-change)
- [without-structural-change](https://www.genderit.org/feminist-talk/can-social-media-platforms-tackle-online-violence-without-structural-change)
- Bernot, A., Trauth-Goik, A., & Trevasques, S. (2021, August 31). China’s ‘surveillance creep’: How big data COVID monitoring could be used to control people post-pandemic. *The Conversation*. Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/chinas-surveillance-creep-how-big-data-covid-monitoring-could-be-used-to-control-people-post-pandemic-164788>
- Bhutada, G. (2021, March 26). Visualizing the most used languages on the internet. *Visual Capitalist*. Retrieved from <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/the-most-used-languages-on-the-internet/>
- Bird, S. (2020, dec). *Decolonising speech and language technology*, Barcelona, Spain (Online).
- Bouterse, S., Sengupta, A., Allman, K., & Pozo, C. (2018). *Decolonizing the internet: Summary report*. Retrieved from <https://whoseknowledge.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/DTI-2018-Summary-Report.pdf>
- Castells, M. (2010). *The power of identity* (2nd ed., with a new preface ed. Vol. 2). Chichester, England: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Civicus. (2021, March 8). Harassment goes virtual: Women activists and journalists speak out. Retrieved from <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/op-eds/4951-harassment-goes-virtual-women-activists-and-journalists-speak>
- Communication rights in the information society: The CRIS campaign. (2002). *Media Development*, 4, 3-4.
- Couldry, N. (2010). *Why voice matters: Culture and politics after neoliberalism*. London: Sage.
- Couldry, N., & Mejias, U. A. (2019). *The costs of connection: How data is colonizing human life and appropriating it for capitalism*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Couldry, N., Rodriguez, C., Bolin, G., Cohen, J., Goggin, G., Kraidy, M. M., . . . Zhao, Y. (2018). *Inequality and communicative struggles in digital times: A global report on communication for social progress*. Philadelphia, PA: Center for Advanced Research in Global Communication (CARGC). Retrieved from [https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=cargc\\_strategicdocuments](https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=cargc_strategicdocuments)
- Cunha, M. d. N. (2020). *Fundamentalisms, the crisis of democracy and the threat to human rights in South America: Trends and challenges for action*. Retrieved from Salvador, Brazil: <https://kn.org.br/noticias/fundamentalismo-crise-na-democracia-e-ameaca-aos-direitos-humanos-na-america-do-sul-e-tema-de-pesquisa-publicada-por-koinonia/7837>
- D’Costa, G. (2005). *Theology in the public square church, academy and nation*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- De Gregorio, G., & Radu, R. (2020, June 14). Fragmenting internet governance: Digital sovereignty and global constitutionalism. *Media Laws*. Retrieved from <https://www.medialaws.eu/fragmenting-internet-governance-digital-sovereignty-and-global-constitutionalism/>
- Deane, J. (2021). *Is independent media a public good and is public subsidy to support it realistic?* Retrieved from [downloads.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/pdf/primed-pathways-media-sustainability-april-2021.pdf](https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/pdf/primed-pathways-media-sustainability-april-2021.pdf)
- Deibert, R. J. (2020). *Reset: Reclaiming the internet for civil society*. Tewkesbury: September Publishing.
- Dias, A., McGregor, J., & Day, L. (2021, July 26). The TikTok spiral. *ABC News*. Retrieved from <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-07-26/tiktok-algorithm-dangerous-eating-disorder-content-censorship/100277134>
- DiSanto, L. (2019, March 14). The internet is changing the way

- we preserve endangered languages. *The Outline*. Retrieved from <https://theoutline.com/post/7156/the-internet-is-changing-the-way-we-preserve-endangered-languages>
- El Asmar, F. (2020, November 25). Claiming and reclaiming the digital world as a public space: Experiences and insights from feminists in the Middle East and North Africa. Retrieved from <https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/claiming-and-reclaiming-digital-world-public-space>
- Elden, S. (2007). There is a politics of space because space is political: Henri Lefebvre and the production of space. *Radical philosophy review*, 10(2), 101-116.
- Ellul, J. (1980). *The technological system* (J. Neugroschel, Trans.). New York: Continuum.
- Equipo de Periodismo Visual de BBC Mundo. (2021, May 14). Los 6 tipos de mensajes falsos más comunes contra las vacunas del covid-19 en las redes sociales (y qué respuestas da la ciencia). Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/resources/idt-21c2c5c6-3973-405e-be7b-2c5ec95a4784>
- Ethnologue. (2021). How many languages are there in the world? Retrieved from <https://www.ethnologue.com/guides/how-many-languages>
- Eubanks, V. (2018). *Automating inequality: How high-tech tools profile, police, and punish the poor*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Fay, R. (2019, October 28). Digital Platforms Require a Global Governance Framework. *Centre for International Governance Innovation*. Retrieved from <https://www.cigionline.org/articles/digital-platforms-require-global-governance-framework/>
- Feminist Principles of the Internet. (2016). Download. Retrieved from <https://feministinternet.org/en/download>
- Fraser, N. (1990). Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. *Social Text*, 25/26, 56-80.
- Fuchs, C., & Unterberger, K. (Eds.). (2021). *The public service media and public service internet manifesto*. London: University of Westminster Press.
- Gardner, S. (2018). *Public broadcasting: Its past and its future*. Retrieved from <https://knightfoundation.org/public-media-white-paper-2017-gardner/>
- Habermas, J. (2006 [1989]). The public sphere: An encyclopedia article. In M. G. Durham & D. M. Kellner (Eds.), *Media and cultural studies: KeyWorks* (Revised ed., pp. 73-78). Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Hainsworth, D. K. (2010). The impact of information technologies on the practices of public theology: Essays in honor of Max L. Stackhouse. In D. K. Hainsworth & S. R. Paeth (Eds.), *Public theology for a global society* (pp. 209-227). Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans.
- Hickey-Moody, A. (2016). Youth agency and adult influence: A critical revision of little publics. *The Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 38(1), 58-72. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/10714413.2016.1119643>
- Indigenous languages in the internet age: How for-profit and non-profits alike help the Americas' languages go digital. (2019, November 27). *Joint National Committee For Languages*. Retrieved from <https://www.languagepolicy.org/post/indigenous-languages-in-the-internet-age>
- International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems. (2004 [1980]). *Many voices, one world [The MacBride Commission]: Towards a new, more just, and more efficient world information and communication order* (1st Rowman & Littlefield ed. ed.). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Ivanescu, I., & Carlson, R. (2021, April 30). China's paper tiger surveillance state. *The Diplomat*. Retrieved from <https://thediplomat.com/2021/04/chinas-paper-tiger-surveillance-state/>
- Just Net Coalition. (2014). The Delhi declaration for a just and equitable internet. Retrieved from <https://justnetcoalition.org/delhi-declaration>
- Kakande, A., Achieng, G., Iyer, N., Nyamwire, B., Nabulega, S., & Mwendwa, I. (2021). *Amplified abuse: Report on online violence against women in the 2021 Uganda general election*. Retrieved from <https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/amplified-abuse-report-online-violence-against-women-2021-uganda-general-election>
- Kolkman, D. (2020). "F\*\*k the algorithm?": What the world can learn from the UK's A-level grading fiasco. Retrieved from <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2020/08/26/fk-the-algorithm-what-the-world-can-learn-from-the-uks-a-level-grading-fiasco/>
- Krauss, M. (1992). The world's languages in crisis. *Language*, 68(1), 4-10.
- Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space* (D. Nicholson-Smith, Trans.). Oxford, England: Blackwell.
- Lin, L., & Purnell, N. (2019, December 6). A world with a billion cameras watching you is just around the corner. *Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from <https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-billion-surveillance-cameras-forecast-to-be-watching-within-two-years-11575565402>
- MEAA. (2021, February 18). Facebook move reinforces need for a News Media Bargaining Code. Retrieved from <https://www.meaa.org/download/facebook-move-reinforces-need-for-a-news-media-bargaining-code/>
- Mitchell, A., & Diamond, L. (2018, February 3). China's surveillance state should scare everyone. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/02/china-surveillance/552203/>
- Montreal Declaration for a Responsible Development of AI. (2017). Montreal declaration for a responsible development of AI. Retrieved from <https://www.montrealdeclaration-responsibleai.com/the-declaration>
- Mueller, M. L., Kuerbis, B. N., & Pagé, C. (2007). Democratizing global communication? Global civil society and the campaign for communication rights in the information society. *International journal of communication*, 1, 267-296.
- Ó Siochrú, S. (2004). Will the real WSIS please stand up? The historic encounter of the 'Information Society' and the 'Communication Society'. *Gazette: The International Journal for Communication Studies*, 66(3-4), 203-224.
- Obermeyer, Z., Powers, B., Vogeli, C., & Mullainathan, S. (2019). Dissecting racial bias in an algorithm used to manage the health of populations. *Science*, 366(6464), 447-453. doi:doi:10.1126/science.aax2342
- OCCRP. (2021, July 18). About the project. Retrieved from <https://www.occrp.org/en/the-pegasus-project/about-the-project>
- Ong, A. (2021, September 1). Excluded: How women suffer from digital poverty in the UK. *Al Jazeera English*. Retrieved from <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2021/9/1/excluded-how-women-suffer-from-digital-poverty-in-the-uk>
- Pariser, E., & Allen, D. (2021, January 5). To thrive, our democracy needs digital public infrastructure. *Politico*. Retrieved from <https://www.politico.com/news/agenda/2021/01/05/to-thrive-our-democracy-needs-digital->

public-infrastructure-455061

- Pérez Vela, R. (2006). *Comunicación política y fundamentalismos religiosos*. Retrieved from Guatemala City, Guatemala:
- Priest, D., Timberg, C., & Mekhennet, S. (2021, July 18). The Pegasus Project: A global investigation - Private Israeli spyware used to hack cellphones of journalists, activists worldwide. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from [https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/interactive/2021/nso-spyware-pegasus-cellphones/?itid=lk\\_inline\\_manual\\_2](https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/interactive/2021/nso-spyware-pegasus-cellphones/?itid=lk_inline_manual_2)
- Project for Public Spaces. (n.d.). What makes a successful place? Retrieved from <https://www.pps.org/article/grplacefeat>
- PublicSpaces. (2021, May). Manifesto. Retrieved from <https://publicspaces.net/english-section/manifesto/>
- Regulating the internet giants: The world's most valuable resource is no longer oil, but data. (2017, May 6). *The Economist*. Retrieved from <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2017/05/06/the-worlds-most-valuable-resource-is-no-longer-oil-but-data>
- Reporters Without Borders. (2021). Index details: Data of press freedom ranking 2021. Retrieved from [https://rsf.org/en/ranking\\_table](https://rsf.org/en/ranking_table)
- Ritchie, R., & Mispy, O.-O. (2020). Measuring progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals - Sustainable Development Goal 9: Build resilient infrastructure, promote sustainable industrialization and foster innovation. Retrieved from <https://sdg-tracker.org/infrastructure-industrialization#targets>
- Shifting the Power Coalition. (2021). *Pacific young women transforming climate crisis to climate justice - Interim findings: Young women and climate change baseline survey*.
- Skutnabb-Kangas, T. (2003). Linguistic diversity and biodiversity: The threat from killer languages. In C. Mair (Ed.), *The politics of English as a world language: New horizons in postcolonial cultural studies* (pp. 31-52). Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Smith, R. E. (2019). *Rage inside the machine: The prejudice of algorithms, and how to stop the internet making bigots of us all*. London: Bloomsbury Business.
- Srinivasan, R. (2017). *Whose global village?: Rethinking how technology shapes our world*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Stackhouse, M. L. (2001). Public theology and political economy in a globalizing era. *Studies in Christian ethics*, 14(2), 63-86. doi:10.1177/095394680101400206
- Statista. (2021, January 27). Most common languages used on the internet as of January 2020, by share of internet users. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/262946/share-of-the-most-common-languages-on-the-internet/>
- Tacchi, J. A. (2008). Voice and poverty. *Media Development*, 2008(1).
- Thomas, P. (2006). The communication rights in the information society (CRIS) campaign: Applying social movement theories to an analysis of global media reform. *International Communication Gazette*, 68(4), 291-312. doi:10.1177/1748048506065763
- Trancozo Trevino, M. (2020, April 15). The many languages missing from the internet. *BBC Future*. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200414-the-many-languages-still-missing-from-the-internet>
- UN Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation (UNSG). (2019). *The age of digital interdependence*. Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/en/pdfs/DigitalCooperation-report-for%20web.pdf>.
- UNESCO. (2016, July 07). Towards World Atlas of Languages. Retrieved from <https://en.unesco.org/news/towards-world-atlas-languages>
- UNESCO. (2019, June 17). UNESCO stands up against the online harassment of women journalists. Retrieved from <https://en.unesco.org/news/unesco-stands-against-online-harassment-women-journalists>
- United Nations (UN). (n.d.). *Transforming our world: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development*. (A/RES/70/1). Retrieved from <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf>.
- United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA). (2019). *Sustainable development outlook 2019: Gathering storms and silver linings*. Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/publication/sustainable-development-outlook-2019-gathering-storms-and-silver-linings/>.
- United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA). (2021). *Leveraging digital technologies for social inclusion*. Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/2021/02/digital-technologies-for-social-inclusion/>
- van der Waal, S., Stikker, M., Kortlander, M., van Eeden, Q., Demeyer, T., & Bocconi, S. (2020). *European digital public spaces*. Retrieved from <https://waag.org/sites/waag/files/202104/Waag%20Report%20on%20Digital%20European%20Public%20Spaces.pdf>
- WACC. (2020). Digital justice manifesto: A call to own our digital future. Retrieved from <https://waccglobal.org/digital-justice-manifesto-a-call-to-own-our-digital-future/>
- Whose Knowledge? (2019, November 11). Towards a multilingual internet. Retrieved from <https://whoseknowledge.org/towards-multilingual-internet/>
- World Council of Churches. (2012, May 25). Busan communication statement: "Reclaiming communication for life, justice and peace". Retrieved from <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/busan-communication-statement>
- WSIS Civil Society. (2005). "Much more could have been achieved": Civil society statement on the World Summit on the Information Society. Retrieved from [www.itu.int/net/wsis/docs2/tunis/contributions/co13.doc](http://www.itu.int/net/wsis/docs2/tunis/contributions/co13.doc)
- Wu, T. (2016). *The attention merchants*. London: Atlantic.
- Xu, B., & Albert, E. (2017, February 17). Backgrounder: Media censorship in China. *Council on Foreign Relations*. Retrieved from <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/media-censorship-china>
- Zuboff, S. (2019). *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*. London: Profile.

# Communication for Social Justice in a Digital Age

*This Manifesto is the outcome of a symposium on “Communication for Social Justice in a Digital Age,” held from 13–15 September 2021. The symposium explored the challenges of digital communication with a social justice lens, and identified opportunities for concerted and collaborative actions with faith communities and among faith, civil society, academic, media and technological organizations.*

## Symposium Manifesto

The symposium was organized by the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC). Co-organizers include Brot für die Welt (Bread for the World), the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), Evangelische Mission Weltweit (EMW, Association of Protestant Churches and Missions in Germany), and the World Student Christian Federation.

The event brought 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 WCC’s 11th Assembly in September 2022.

### Our global context

Digital technologies are transforming our world and the multiple spaces in which we live and move.

These technologies offer us new ways to communicate, to inform ourselves and navigate the world, to advocate for our human dignity and

rights, and for our voices to be heard.

They create new ways for us to interact with each other beyond the boundaries of time and space.

They can be powerful tools for living in relation with others, for inclusion, education, encounter, imagination, creativity, and understanding.

Yet, digital technologies provide both opportunities and challenges.

Digital platforms are also being used to spread deliberate disinformation and hate and undermine human dignity and rights.

Politically motivated digital campaigns of “fake news” undermine democratic processes and responsible journalism.

While digital platforms seem to provide unfettered opportunities for freedom of expression, growing digital technology monopolies threaten a diversity of voices and perspectives.

Communication is increasingly mediated by proprietary platforms that promise a dream of democratized empowerment but monetize data and time in the so-called “attention economy”. Users have become the new commodity.

Private data is increasingly requested, collected, and controlled by a small number of platforms to take advantage of people for economic and political purposes.

Surveillance, marginalization, and militarization are significant threats in digital spaces.

Algorithms developed according to subjective criteria reflect the ongoing effects of colonisation, racism and systemic power imbalances and exacerbate existing inequities and discrimination.

The COVID-19 pandemic also amplifies inequities –those who are digitally excluded become increasingly marginalized due to a shift to online learning and economies. Cybersecurity concerns are increased, particularly in healthcare.

### Theological perspectives

This transformation of society raises profound issues that the ecumenical fellowship has wres-

tled with for many decades: power, justice, equity, participation, promoting sustainable communities, how voices from the margins are heard, as well as human dignity.

In seeking to respond to the issues raised by digital transformation, we can find in many faith traditions an incredible depth of insight about what it means to be human and to live justly within the web of creation.

Two intrinsically connected aspects must play a central role in a theological reflection on digital justice: relationality and vulnerability.

Christians believe that being created in the image of God provides inherent dignity to every woman, man, and child (Gen 1:27.) Humans are created to be relational and capable of collaboration and communication. We are called to take responsibility and care for God's creation.

In Jesus Christ, God became vulnerable and shared human life. Therefore, creation and human beings remain at the centre of our reflections and our concerns. This shared vulnerability motivates us to protect individual and community rights and use digital technologies for the wellbeing of human beings. The biblical preferential option for the poor and vulnerable directs our attention to information poverty and the digital divides in the global face of digitization (Matt 5.)

We are called to a journey of justice and peace and to ensure the integrity of creation. We are called to participate in God's mission to ensure that all may have life and have it abundantly, also in the digital sphere (John 10:10.)

In 2022, the ecumenical fellowship will gather in Karlsruhe, Germany, for the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches, in a world marred by many kinds of injustice and by the pain of many of its people, its creatures, and even of the Earth itself.

But it is also a world that is witnessing movements of change, justice, and hope.

### Issues and challenges

Digitalization in its many forms raises new questions about human identity and freedom. Not

only social coherence but human dignity itself is at stake.

Digitalization also raises questions of ecological justice, including the use of resources and the planned obsolescence of digital technologies.

Political, cultural, and civil society actors, academic sectors, and communities of faith are all struggling to respond effectively.

To respond to challenges and opportunities of the digital age, we need an inclusive and holistic participatory approach that is both international and intergenerational, based on the sacred value of social justice.

This prompts us to ask: How can we envision and work for a communication and information ecosystem based on social justice principles such as inclusive participation, freedom, equity, sustainable life and solidarity, that

- \* enables everyone to exercise fully their human rights, civil rights, and responsibilities
- \* strengthens a sense of belonging and collective participation
- \* encourages alliances and coalitions that build credibility, mutual accountability, and trust
- \* seeks to include and celebrate missing, ignored, silenced, and marginalized voices in the digital sphere
- \* combats explicit and implicit bias, racism, gender discrimination, and extremism in digital technologies
- \* expresses solidarity with the communities it serves, and is not profit- or power-oriented
- \* encourages platforms that promote community, cohesion, collaboration, and relationship building for human wellbeing and the wellbeing of the planet
- \* encourages platforms that are transparent and openly name the values that drive the platform
- \* leverages Open-Source technologies in a digital economy and shares knowledge and data as open knowledge

We identified the following specific challenges.

*The Digital Divides:* We face various digital

divides: economic, geographic, racial, educational, class, gender, age, cultural, technological, and global. There are also digitally caused divides.

These digital divides point to both the complexity of social justice in a digital age and the need for intersectional reflection. Digital justice requires, at the same time, gender justice, climate justice, economic justice, racial justice, and so much more.

*Accessibility:* The primary concern is often seen as access to the digital space itself, emphasizing the difference between lower-, middle-, and higher-income economies, but also in-country differences. Meaningful access includes access to basic communication infrastructure such as stable electricity and internet connections, tech devices, access to various digital tools, data, programming and content from the local cultural context, but also the legal frameworks and economic resources to access and invest in them.

Access affects power relations and distributions of resources, and as such, access to digital technologies is both a cause and a result of divides.

Accessibility is an essential issue in the disabled community. Digitalization has improved participation in economic activity, entertainment, and social interaction for people with disabilities. Accessibility in this sphere, however, also remains divided along global wealth lines.

*Public space:* This is the space where states and the public interact, where people, including the media, can express thoughts and feelings and participate democratically. Digitalization creates the opportunity for expanding this space, but the



restriction of digital freedom can also cause this space to shrink.

*Inequity:* Control, use, and analysis of data gathered due to digitalization are heavily vested in a few corporations and in specific geographic regions. Governments may also be heavily implicated in data control and manipulation.

*Education:* Digital education, including in questioning and critical examination of information and sources, is vital for all people. Access to this education is often sharply divided based on age, academic background, language, gender, geographical location, and societal gender roles.

*Gender justice:* Women benefit from digitalization in the personal, educational, and economic arena, and active participation in the digital space can contribute to full participation in all domains of life. However, pervasive gender power inequities restrict this access.

Increased digitalization has also led to greater exposure of girls and women to sexualized harassment, surveillance, trolling, and online hate, which may also lead to physical violence. The impact of online violence is silencing women, forcing them to disengage from the digital space.

*Privacy and security:* The universal challenges of the use of data and loss of privacy are compounded by arbitrary government control, na-

tional digital laws and guidelines that are vague and fraught with loopholes, internet blackouts that clamp down on online dissent, and unwarranted state surveillance.

*Militarization:* There is military investment in digital technologies, and the technologies are in turn militarized –increasing risk in situations of war and conflict.

### **Principles to promote communication for social justice in a digital age**

No matter the issue – violence against women, abuse of children, poverty, conflict resolution, self-determination, racism, migration, labour rights, Indigenous rights, health, land, climate – little can be done without effective communication.

For this, we need a holistic, inclusive approach to create digital technologies that promote life, dignity, and justice rather than undermine it.

We need principles that allow all people to engage in transparent, informed, and democratic debate, where people have unfettered access to the information and knowledge essential to peaceful coexistence, empowerment, responsible civic engagement, and mutual accountability.

Rooted in the history of communication rights, these principles provide for a world in which:

- \* Everyone is entitled to communicate, to inform, and to share knowledge. This requires equitable access to communication infrastructures and the right to free expression.
- \* Everyone is entitled to participate in the information and communication society with particular consideration for minority and vulnerable groups. This requires inclusive and participatory governance of media infrastructures and digital platforms.
- \* Everyone is entitled to fair and unbiased public communication. This requires ethical norms, accountability, and redress for misrepresentation.
- \* Everyone is entitled to dignity and respect.

This requires transparency and accountability of media and digital platforms.

- \* Everyone is entitled to privacy and control of their information, including deleting their data, provided they are not engaged in human rights abuses or criminal activity. This should be inherent and intrinsic to each person's digital identity and requires legal frameworks that balance the right to privacy and the protection of human rights.
- \* Everyone is entitled to their own cultural and linguistic identity. This requires spaces for linguistic and cultural diversity, and access to ownership and control of media.
- \* Everyone is entitled to communication skills and media literacy. This requires culturally appropriate training and building dialogue, conversation, listening, openness, and critical thinking skills.
- \* Everyone has access to sustainable power sources to enable their digital or electronic media. This requires access to technologies such as solar or wind power.
- \* Everyone is entitled to affordable devices or public access to devices in safe spaces. This requires economic resources as well as the Right to Repair.

### **A transformative movement**

To achieve digital justice, we need a transformative movement of individuals, communities, educational institutions, media agencies, and civil society – including communities of faith. We need government policies and actions that are informed and supported by civil society, founded on human dignity, human rights, and democratic principles.

Fundamental rights will not prevail on their own or through voluntary commitments by corporations. The broad support and joint commitment of civil society, including churches and faith communities, political actors, science, and business, is needed to guarantee and protect civil rights in the digital age and make the digital space usable for the common good.

We gathered in the symposium on “Com-



munication for Social Justice in a Digital Age” to explore these issues – to reflect and to share visions of a future in which technologies are placed at the service of people rather than governments or corporations.

- \* We underlined the need for shared principles of inclusion, respect, and equity.
- \* We pointed to the vital importance of communication rights for marginalized peoples and communities worldwide.
- \* We affirmed that rights in digital spaces must be an extension of human rights in public spaces.
- \* We rejected any justification of online violence through misuse of the gospel.
- \* We agreed on the centrality of the rights of children and that young people have unique opportunities for intergenerational leadership in our digital transformation.
- \* We emphasized that collected (non-personal) data should be available to serve the common good.
- \* We underlined the need for increased accountability and transparency for corporations that have the power and ability to influence and shape public and political discourse.
- \* We highlighted the dangers of the darknet for illegal and harmful activities such as organ trafficking, human trafficking, sexual exploitation, weapon- and drugs sales, and even recruitment to extremist organizations. We support interventions that help societies to eradicate these activities.
- \* We acknowledged the power of digital spaces as tools for oppressed communities to claim their identities and express themselves.
- \* We challenged faith communities to reach their potential to expand just digital access to those who are marginalized.

To unlock the opportunities and address the challenges of digital technologies, we need to re-imagine our digital public sphere continuously, emphasizing democracy, fundamental rights, mutual accountability, and solidarity.

We will work with state and civil society ac-

tors and faith groups, to create spaces and channels that are inclusive, interactive, and participatory, promoting digital justice, expanding public space, and creating visions for the future.

We will encourage theological and ethical critiques of the powers that operate unregulated, commercially driven digital spaces.

We will create a grassroots, faith-inspired resistance to the forces challenging human dignity and flourishing in digital spaces.

In a continued and collaborative process, we commit ourselves to develop a programme of action to create this re-imagined reality in different contexts.

We will continue to act together so that “justice roll(s) down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24). ■

*This manifesto is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. With appropriate credit, this report can be copied, redistributed and adapted for non-commercial purposes. If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you must distribute your contributions under the same license as the original. Full details of the license can be [found here](#).*

# The Copenhagen Pledge

## Tech for Democracy

We believe that the future of democracy relies on our ability to leverage and steer the digital transformation of society in ways that capitalize on its opportunities, while also confronting the challenges. We stand at a crucial junction in the history of democracy, and we need to jointly, responsibly, and proactively develop and use digital technologies and online spaces to cultivate and strengthen democracy, human rights, and the rule of law around the world.

We consider digital technologies, when developed and used responsibly, to be of great potential for supporting democratic institutions, increasing transparency and accountability in governance, and for protecting and promoting human rights. A human rights-based approach to digital technologies and responsible handling of data can help foster a democratic culture, broaden civic engagement in democratic processes, and enhance the open and free exchange of ideas so vital to democracies.

Nevertheless, our expectations and aspirations for the use of digital technologies to work for – and not against – democracy and the enjoyment of human rights have not been fully met. We condemn the exploitation of digital technologies by State and non-State actors to repress and undermine democracy and the enjoyment of human rights, and we recognize that some digital technologies may be exploited to control and infringe upon civic spaces both online and offline.

We remain deeply concerned about any approaches to the development and use of digital technologies or to governance that are inconsistent with international human rights law, free and fair elections, and the vision of an open, accessible, interoperable, secure, and reliable Internet.

We have an opportunity and a joint obliga-

tion to develop, use, and promote technology in a manner that strengthens democracy. Therefore, we, a multi-stakeholder alliance of governments, multilateral organizations, civil society, and technology companies, hereby commit to working together on promoting a vision for the digital age – based on democratic values and principles.

We believe that the human rights and fundamental freedoms that people have offline must also be protected and promoted online, and we therefore pledge to:

Ensure that the development and use of digital technologies support democratic institutions and processes and contribute to an open and democratic debate online that allows for the free exchange and expression of ideas, by:

- \* applying our shared democratic values and a human rights-based approach in the design, development, deployment, and use of digital technologies;
- \* sharing best practices, promoting responsible people-centric approaches, and partnering on inclusive solutions for democracy online and human rights-based digital governance;
- \* developing digital public goods to promote a safe, active, respectful and tolerant civic participation in democratic processes online.

Make use of digital technologies to enhance the digital resilience and mobilization of civil society, including journalists, pro-democracy activists, and human rights defenders worldwide, by:

- \* supporting the development and use of digital technologies by and for civil society actors to help protect against human rights violations and abuses and to strengthen accountability;
- \* enhancing capacity-development, awareness raising, and available resources to increase the digital literacy and digital safety of civil society;
- \* using digital technologies proactively to narrow digital divides, with a particular focus on marginalized, vulnerable, or disenfranchised groups worldwide.

*Source: Tech for Democracy*

# Corona, the digital divide and Indigenous peoples

Donn J. Tilson

*Black swan events come as a surprise, have a major effect, and are dismissed afterward according to their historical significance – World War I, the 1918 influenza pandemic, 9–11. Add to the list the Corona-19 pandemic, which has disrupted world economies, putting millions out of work, pushing countries into recession, stretching health-care resources to their limit, and leaving more than five million dead globally, even as new, more transmissible variant forms take their toll.*

The virus also revealed disparities in health care – i.e. the availability of vaccines, emergency medical resources, mental health services – the basic safety nets of society (food, housing, employment), and digital technology, exacerbating divides that pre-existed the pandemic and, in the U.S., particularly impacting the lives of people of colour and Indigenous Nations. People of colour who could not be vaccinated in drive-up sites as they did not have a vehicle. Latino/a employees – a majority of the workforce in the hospitality industry – laid off only to see their jobs disappear when employers never re-opened or cut staff to survive. Navajo students without Wi-Fi service at home who climbed bluffs with their laptops to connect to online classes via Zoom, Facebook Live, and Instagram Live.

Going to such extremes to access the Internet is no surprise for Indigenous peoples in the

U.S. According to the Federal Communications Commission, 628,000 tribal households lack access to standard broadband, a rate more than four times that of the general population (Schapiro, 2021). A 2019 study by the American Indian Policy Institute found nearly one in five reservation residents has no Internet at home (Terrill, 2020). Computers, landline phones, and electricity also are absent from Indigenous households – nearly 15,000 of the 55,000 homes in the Navajo Nation, the largest Native American territory in the U.S., for example, do not have electricity, making up 75% of all unelectrified households in the U.S.

## **COVID and worship – A perfect storm**

COVID also fundamentally changed the nature of worship in the U.S. as religious authorities closed houses of worship in the interest of public safety beginning an era of virtual worship that both revealed and exacerbated a pre-existing digital divide within congregations and communities (Tilson, 2022). Media-poor congregations (often people of colour) that lacked high-tech resources for worship (talent, equipment or funding) turned to low-tech as an alternative to the closure of their house of worship. Groups met in private homes often exceeding the admonition to avoid gatherings of more than 10. Other congregations met and prayed on the front lawn of their house of worship. Some Christian denominations offered drive-through Communion and confession or drive-in theatre-like services with celebrants broadcasting through outdoor microphones and amplifiers.

Congregations with the resources and technical savvy, however, turned services into virtual worship that ranged in sophistication from mid-tech to high-tech. Better resourced denominations that regularly brokered air time on local radio added services to their schedule of programming. Larger houses of worship, such as the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C., began livestream telecasts of services on their website, offered in real time and online/on-de-

mand. Mosques and synagogues also used their websites and other social media platforms to reach the faithful. For people of colour and Indigenous populations, however, the lack of Internet access remained a serious impediment to fellowship – limited at best and, in some cases, non-existent – throughout the course of the pandemic from mid-March 2020 to the opening of houses of worship in late March 2021.

### **Alaska – the last frontier**

Alaska, often dubbed the “last frontier”, is a prime example of the various disparities underscored by the pandemic, in particular the digital divide, and the heavy toll exacted from Native peoples, who comprise 27.9% of the population, the state with the highest proportion of Indigenous people in the U.S. For access to the Internet – as well as computers, phones, and electricity – American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) Nations are in last place as is Alaska.

While Alaska is a vast territory covering more than 660,000 square miles, the population (750,000) is spread out widely – an average density of only 1.2 persons per square mile – and unevenly, concentrated in only few cities, i.e. Anchorage, Fairbanks, Juneau, which are the principal hubs of commerce, education, and government, revealing an urban and rural divide in many respects.

According to BroadbandNow Alaska is not only the last digital frontier in the U.S but has a major digital divide:

- \* last in Internet connectivity;
- \* the lowest amount of broadband infrastructure;
- \* the least broadband connectivity;
- \* large urban areas with up to 99% access to wired broadband services;
- \* the majority of counties (rural areas) with 0% access.

Yet other research – Population Reference Bureau – reveals a racial and ethnic digital divide in Alaska:

- \* half of AI/AN children lack either comput-

ers or paid high-speed Internet access (or both) at home;

- \* more than one-third of Black and Latino/a children lack computers or high-speed Internet at home, compared with only one-fifth of non-Hispanic white children and one in seven Asian/Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander (NHOPI) children.

Into this divide COVID blew through the Indigenous population in Alaska as a true scourge, worsening media poverty, and the quality of health care and education. Forced into hibernation to avoid contamination and without means of communicating, Indigenous people were especially isolated from each other leading to a range of health and social disorders.

The Catholic Diocese of Fairbanks best illustrates the impact of the pandemic on Indigenous people and the digital divide. Of the 46 parishes in the Fairbanks Diocese (410,000 square miles, 10,000 Catholics) only nine are accessible by road and, as one of the poorest dioceses in the U.S., only eight are financially self-sustaining. All parishes in Fairbanks (4) are accessible by road and self-sustaining, have Internet access, a Website with links to Masses livestreamed from their parish and other broadcast venues and available for on-demand viewing later; these parishes also are in the television and radio broadcast area of the Eternal Word Television Network, a global Catholic broadcaster.

The majority of the diocese’s parishes, however, are rural, lack Internet access, do not have a Website, and can receive EWTN television broadcasts of the Mass only by satellite as no radio broadcasts are available ([www.dioceseof-fairbanks.org](http://www.dioceseof-fairbanks.org)). The rural parishes are predominantly Indigenous. Of these, most families do not have a computer and those who do experience inconsistent Internet service (“A New Way”, 2021).

The pandemic left diocesan Indigenous congregations without benefit of clergy, church services or fellowship for more than a year. In sparsely-populated areas, families without Internet or satellite broadcasts of religious television programming huddled around radios led in dio-

cesan weekly prayer and scripture readings via VHF (very high frequency) transmissions. Funerals of extended family members that traditionally are moments of communal mourning were prohibited. As a religious who coordinates ministry for the diocese explained, [Indigenous people in Alaska] “are communal and process life in and through their family through social gatherings... Except now they can’t and this way of doing things [shutdowns, social distancing, and quarantines] is completely against their culture” (“A New Way”, 2021).

While the pandemic highlighted Alaska’s digital divide, it exacerbated others, especially medical care. The number of COVID cases spiked among AI/AN populations, and medical treatment was challenged to adequately deal with the emergency. Typically, village health care resources are basic, and serious cases require travel (often by air) to larger cities; however, in urban areas the number of beds and ventilators for COVID patients is limited. The majority of Alaska Natives are immunocompromised – most having underlying health conditions – and are vulnerable to COVID (“A New Way”, 2021). According to the state’s [Division of Public Health](#), Indigenous peoples registered the highest rate of COVID hospitalization in Alaska (372.5 per 100,000 in that race/ethnicity group) from March 2020 to July 2021. AI/AN peoples also registered the highest rate of deaths (72.3%; 129 deaths) from January 2020 through July 31, 2021.

Moreover, owing to the social impact of the pandemic – the loss of loved ones (without the communal support needed to express grief and to heal), prolonged isolation from extended family and neighbours, unemployment, and uncertainty of the future – Indigenous peoples suffered in greater numbers than the general population with issues of mental health; those most economically challenged were the ones [hit the hardest](#) as the percentage of AI/AN peoples living in poverty is nearly double that of the U.S. as a whole according to the [National Congress of American Indians](#). According to the Department of Health and Human Services [National](#)

[Institute of Health Alaska](#) Native youth have the highest rate of suicide of all demographic groups and suffer disproportionately compared to youth in the rest of the U.S. Other indicators of marginalization – illness, poverty, poor education, underemployment – compound the sense of hopelessness that destroys the spirit.

### **Narrowing the divide – a way forward**

There is promise on the horizon to narrow the divides provided a holistic approach is taken to address what is essentially a systemic problem. A number of initiatives are underway to empower Native peoples by developing existing resources and adding others that are needed.

A \$1.2 trillion infrastructure modernization plan for the nation’s roads, energy, and telecommunications approved by Congress and signed into law by President Joe Biden in early November 2021 will expand the nation’s electric grid and broadband network providing power to households without electricity and affordable Internet access to rural and low-income communities; those with an income at or below 200% of the federal poverty line would be eligible for a \$30 a month Internet subsidy (Daugherty, 2021) with Native peoples clearly in line to benefit.

Other provisions include funding for clean energy and renewable energy projects and electric vehicle charging infrastructure with a particular focus on rural and disadvantaged communities (Caprez, 2021). Still other federal legislation is under consideration to expand access to existing broadband service in Indigenous schools and libraries and to tribal communities lacking a library by providing high-speed Internet at an affordable rate; community centres, colleges, and universities also would qualify for the service (“Pilot Broadband Program”, 2020). The funding would be in addition to federal grants through Alaska’s Department of Commerce, Community and Economic Development to expand [broadband access within the state](#).

Yet other initiatives in partnership with academia and industry include U.S. Department of Energy projects in Alaskan Arctic AI/AN com-

munities to deploy clean energy systems and advance viable cold climate electric transportation alternatives; these include building wind farms, installing solar grids, extracting electrical power from moving water, designing energy-efficient structures, and powering the region's transportation infrastructure from ships and cars to buses and aircraft with electricity ("Arctic Innovation Abounds", 2021).

If solar power and wind/water fields and electric transportation infrastructure were designed, built, and operated by tribal peoples the impact on AI/AN communities and their youngsters (if they were trained as engineers and managers by partner colleges/universities) would be monumental. Various [University of Alaska Fairbanks](#) certificate and degree programs are training Indigenous students to do just that. A.A.S. degree studies in construction management are preparing graduates for entry-level positions and construction employees with continuing education to work with engineers, architects, and contractors on industrial, highway, and building projects.

Occupational Endorsement programs provide education and training for careers in sustainable energy and energy efficiency and prep students for certificates in engineering and science-related fields. UAF B.A. degrees in Native Studies and Rural Development train students to maintain Indigenous control of development projects and address needs of communities; concentrations of studies include governance and integrated resource management. Yet other certificate and A.A.S. degree programs address the need for quality health care preparing students for careers as community health aides in villages or as healers/natural helpers in village-based public, private and volunteer human service organizations.

Society has too often advanced a worldview with values antithetical to the common good, reflected in behaviour unconscionable in an interconnected world (COVID-19 may yet prove to have been unleashed by a violation of the natural order) and creating divides that not only separate

people from one another but from their humanity and all of Creation. As Indigenous peoples in Arctic regions can attest, radical anthropocentrism has consequences from melting icebergs to rising sea levels to extreme weather.

Treaties and legislation alone cannot ensure social justice as the history of broken promises to Indigenous Nations confirms. What is needed is a re-thinking of relationships to embrace the broader understanding of "family" that Native culture teaches – the entire village. And, to embrace a worldview – *caritas* – that focuses attention outward in a spirit of compassion and guides behaviour as stewardship-guardianship for the benefit of all. ■

### References

- A new way of life amidst COVID-19. (Winter 2021). *The Alaskan Shepherd*, p. 3.
- Arctic innovation abounds with Department of Energy projects. (2021, August 17). Retrieved September 9, 2021 from <https://www.energy.gov/articles/arctic-innovation-abounds-department-energy-projects>
- Caprez, K. (2021, November 8). H.R. 3684: Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. *The National Law Review*. Retrieved November 9, 2021 from <https://apple.news./AWdEwBtAPRC6iNbDWGW8mlg>
- Daugherty, A. (2021, November 9). Billions of dollars coming to Florida when Biden's infrastructure bill is law. *The Miami Herald*, p. 1A, 9A.
- Pilot broadband program. (2021, September 9). *Native News Online*. Retrieved August 8, 2021 from <https://nativenewsonline.net/currents/federal-legislation-to-expand-tribal-access-to-affordable-high-speed-internet-create-100m-pilot-broadband-program>
- Schapiro, A. (2020, July 7). Coronavirus crisis threatens internet opportunity for Native Americans. *Reuters*. Retrieved August 28, 2021 from <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKCN24T06B>
- Terrill, M. (2020, June 23). Native nations are fighting COVID-19 on many levels. *ASU News*. Retrieved August 28, 2021 from <https://news.asu.edu/20200623-solutions-native-nations-fighting-covid-19-many-levels>
- Tilson, D. (2022). *The Promotion of Devotion: Religion, Culture and Communication* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). San Diego, CA: Cognella, Inc.

Donn J. Tilson, an associate professor emeritus at the School of Communication, University of Miami, has published and lectured extensively on public relations, culture, and religion, including as a Fulbright Scholar (University of Ottawa) in interfaith dialogue. His book, *The Promotion of Devotion: Religion, Culture and Communication*, is a pioneering work in the field and currently in revision as a second edition (Cognella, 2022). He continues to explore the confluence of public relations, social responsibility, and faith in ancient civilizations, Indigenous peoples, and other present-day societies. [dtilson@miami.edu](mailto:dtilson@miami.edu)

## Lübeck (Germany) 2021

At the 63rd Nordic Film Days Lübeck (November 3-7, 2021), the INTERFILM Jury awarded the Church Film Prize, endowed with €5,000 x by the Evangelical Church District Lübeck-Lauenburg, to the film *The Gravedigger's Wife* directed by Khadar Ayderus Ahmed (Finland, France, Germany, 2021).

*Motivation:* *The Gravedigger's Wife* (still below) is the most heartfelt and beautiful film which keeps you warm long after screening. It has excellent visual work and sound design in addition to superb acting, which makes this film hard to forget.

The story takes us into a very poor Somali family, where Khadar Ayderus Ahmed explores true human values in such a way that is understandable universally and doesn't leave audiences indifferent. We see ourselves in the story about love, friendship and hope. It shows a great respect for human dignity and opens up for discussion about how we see and treat each other as human beings.

In addition, the Jury awarded a Commendation to the film *Sokea mies, joka ei halunnut nähdä Titanicia* ('The Man Who Did Not Want



to See Titanic) directed by Teemu Nikki (Finland, 2021).

*Motivation:* In a unique way the film allows the viewer to begin to understand handicapped people's view on the world. It's a masterfully executed project, which deserves a large audience, because it's a stepping stone towards greater empathy. The film features one of the strongest lead characters. Petri Poikolainen, having the same disease as his character, portrays Jaakko with dignity and humour.

Members of the 2021 Jury: Ingrid Glatz-Anderegg (President of the Jury, Switzerland); Guntars Laucis (Estonia); Inga Meißner (Germany); Morten Sternberg (Denmark).

## Cottbus (Germany) 2021

The Award of the Ecumenical Jury at the 31st Festival of East European Cinema Cottbus (November 2-7, 2021) went to the film *Brighton 4th* directed by Levan Koguashvili.

*Motivation:* A former Georgian wrestler travels to Brooklyn to help his son out of a gambling debt. With emotional images and precise and focused storytelling, the film shows a father's commitment to his son in a Georgian expatriate community in New York. This is a powerful film about peace, respect and humanity in a society full of structural violence.

Members of the 2021 Jury: Ewa Jelinek, Czech Republic; Françoise Wilkowsky-Dehove, France; Dr. Josef Nagel, Germany; Théo Péporté, Luxembourg. ■

*WACC has long supported the work of its partners INTERFILM and SIGNIS at several international and national film festivals where ecumenical, inter-religious or solely Protestant juries award prizes to outstanding films.*