

Communication for Social Justice in a Digital Age

— MANIFESTO —



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

The symposium was organized by the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the World Association for Christian Communication. Co-organizers included 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 colonization, 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 wrestled 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 distribution 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, national 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 “Communication 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 actors 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.

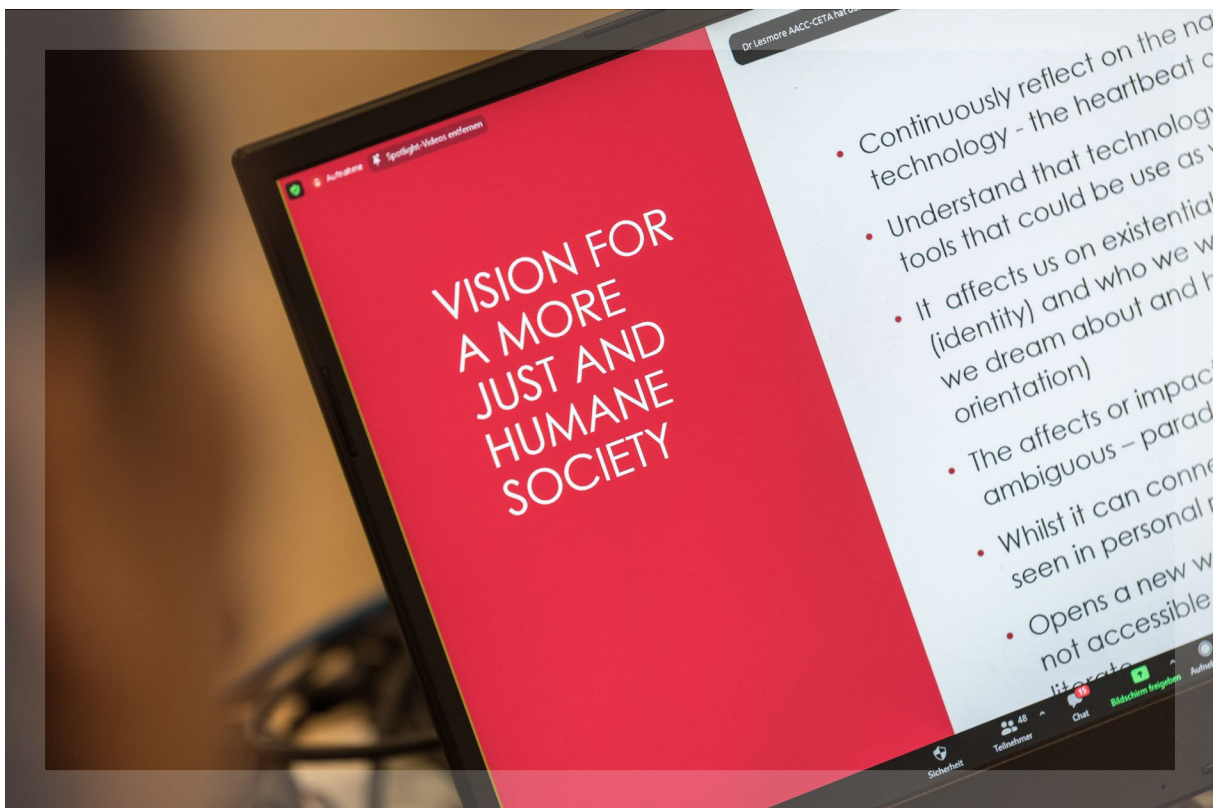
In a continued and collaborative process, we commit ourselves to develop a programme of action to create this re-imagined reality in different contexts.

We will continue to act together so that

justice roll(s) down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

(Amos 5:24)

21 September 2021



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