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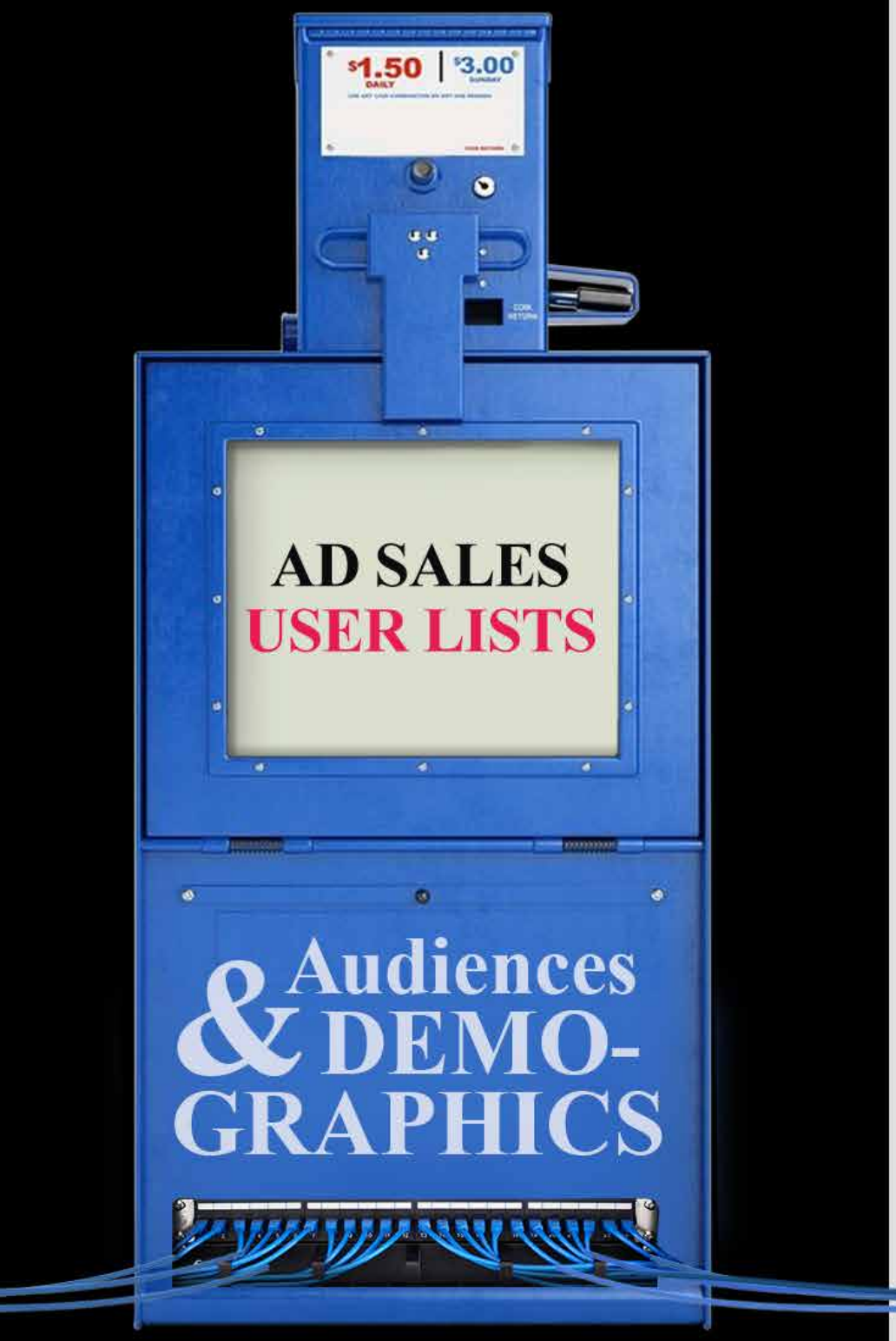
WACC

Democratizing Communication, Rediscovering Solidarity



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In the next issue

The 4/2022 issue of *Media Development* will gather various statements on communication in the light of how today's digital technologies continue to transform society and the way we live.

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EDITORIAL

The theme "Democratizing Communication, Rediscovering Solidarity" suggests that there is an essential link between people's capacity to communicate their concerns and aspirations and their ability to bring about greater political and social justice.

We know already that Putin's savage, criminal, and inhuman war on Ukraine was in part facilitated by social media propaganda and State control of mass media – especially television. Kept in ignorance or lied to by the State, the Russian people could not express their solidarity with their Ukrainian cousins. And in the Philippines, Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s election to the presidency was allegedly due to a flood of online trickery and disinformation in the run-up to polling, effectively silencing public criticism and opposition.

In their 1988 book *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky argued that people could be manipulated by covert propaganda and systemic biases to provide consent for economic, social, and political policies, both foreign and domestic. This "propaganda model" identified corporate media as businesses interested in the sale of a product (audiences) to other businesses (advertisers) rather than in public service journalism. It also critiqued the growing concentration of media ownership in many countries.

Published just before the rise of the global Internet, the propaganda model could not have taken into account the impact of social media networks (including the sale of consumer data) nor the pervasive influence of Big Tech. Now, in *The Power of Platforms: Shaping Media and Society* (Oxford University Press, 2022), Rasmus Kleis Nielsen and Sarah Anne Ganter have identified forms of "platform power" that tech companies are able to exercise at scale. According to the authors, the five most important aspects of this platform power are:

* The power to *set standards* that others in turn have to abide by if they want to be part of the social and technical networks – and markets – those platforms enable.
* The power to *make and break connections* within these networks by changing social rules ("community standards") or technical protocols (search and social ranking algorithms).
* The power of *automated action at scale* as their technologies enable and shape billions of transactions and interactions every day.
* The power of *information asymmetry* relative to users, competitors, regulators, and other outside actors, as they operate as opaque black boxes where outsiders can only see input and output on the basis of limited and biased data and the platforms alone are privy to how the processes work and have access to much more detailed data.
* The power to *operate across domains*, where the data collected through a photo-sharing app can be used to target advertising on a social network, and the ecosystem created through a mobile operating system can help sell hardware.

Elsewhere, Reporters Without Borders' 2022 *World Press Freedom Index: A new era of polarisation* identifies how false news and deliberate disinformation are continuing to debilitate democratic debate:

> "Within democratic societies, divisions are growing as a result of the spread of opinion media following the 'Fox News model' and the spread of disinformation circuits that are amplified by the way social media functions. At the international level, democracies are being weakened by the asymmetry between open societies and despotic regimes that control their media and online platforms while waging propaganda wars against democracies. Polarisation on these two levels is fuelling increased tension."

The methodology used to draw up the Index defines press freedom as "the effective possibility for journalists, as individuals and as groups, to select, produce and disseminate news and information in the public interest, independently from political, economic, legal and social interference, and without threats to their physical and mental safety."

In this context, the role of social media platforms as propaganda tools needs to be explored thoroughly if freedom of the press is to remain a bastion of democracy, especially in a world that increasingly relies on digital technologies underpinned by Artificial Intelligence (AI).

It is a world where AI is shaping contemporary politics, where public authorities use AI to automate the allocation of public services, where judges use risk-assessment algorithms to determine a person's eligibility for bail or parole, where political actors use AI and social media platforms to engage in microtargeting and misinformation, and where law enforcement agencies use facial recognition systems and predictive analytics to improve surveillance.

Despite all this, AI has the potential to enhance democracy by enabling a deeper understanding of societal issues as well as helping to develop more effective policy tools and actions. On the other hand, when abused, AI helps to reinforce existing inequalities and biases, to increase polarization and ultimately to undermine not only democratic systems but also the preconditions that enable democracy to flourish.

On 15 April 2021, members of the European Union's Special Committee on Artificial Intelligence in a Digital Age (AIDA) heard two panel discussions on the topics of AI and the future of democracy, and on tech developments and regulatory approaches to disinformation. At the start, Romanian politician and AIDA Chair Dragoș Tudorache observed:

> " At the dawn of the digital age, we must set in place rules, worldwide, which will ensure AI will not be used to undermine democracy. First, we need to look inward, and ensure that we do not allow the use of AI for undemocratic practices such as mass surveillance, mass social scoring by the state, or discrimination in Europe. Second, we must reach out to the world's democracies and work together to build an alliance of digital democracies strong enough to set the rules, standards, and red lines of a democratic digital future, worldwide. Third, we need to ensure that we are protected - by strengthening our cybersecurity, increasing our own citizens' resilience to fake news and disinformation through education, and developing cutting-edge tools to counter cutting-edge at- tacks. Last but not least, we need to understand that AI-powered attacks on democracy can be even more devastating than conventional attacks and we must treat them as such. This needs to be reflected in our defence policy, in our cooperation with and participation in NATO, in our transatlantic alliance, and in our global strategy."[1]

The convergence of digital platforms and AI poses new challenges to communication rights that need to be identified, systematized, and independently regulated to prevent a global system from emerging that is entirely dominated and controlled by corporate interests and despotic regimes. Time is running out. ■

Note

1. AIDA Working Paper on "AI and the Future of Democracy". June 2021. European Parliament.

Democratizing the platforms: Promises and perils of public utility regulation

Victor Pickard

The democratic world faces a wicked problem. Information and communication systems that people rely on for many facets of their daily lives have become increasingly antidemocratic, causing profound harm across the globe. The technologies driving these systems – aimed primarily to extract data from users and sell for profit – are designed and deployed without public consent. How do we bring platform companies that operate these systems under democratic control?

In general, three basic options present themselves: 1) break up, 2) regulate, or 3) create non-commercial, public alternatives. These approaches are not mutually exclusive and often overlap – societies can implement them simultaneously. For example, in addition to breaking up platform monopolies, governments might use regulatory incentives and penalties to prevent these firms from exploiting their market power and causing social harm. Democratic governments also can create "public options" to encourage good behaviour from commercial players while providing public services that market-driven institutions are unlikely to deliver.

Thus far, however, platforms like Facebook (now known as Meta) have largely escaped such arrangements. While the European Union's Digital Service Act and Digital Media Act hold promise – potentially ensuring some degree of social responsibility, greater competition, and better protections for individual freedoms – platforms have continued to dodge significant government regulation and public oversight. Moreover, despite their privileged position within the global political economy, platforms generally are not held to the level of public accountability normally expected of state-sanctioned monopolies.

Given that many large platform companies have become invaluable digital infrastructures, societies should democratize their ownership and governance. Toward this objective, one argument gaining traction in recent years is that platform monopolies should be subject to public utility regulation. But many questions persist about the viability of this approach. The following essay sketches an overview of recent thinking about the promises and perils of the public utility approach and how this regulatory framework might be applied to platforms. I conclude with a brief discussion regarding more radical alternatives that warrant further consideration within current policy debates.

The public utility option

Broadly speaking, public utilities are institutions that provide essential services and goods to the public. Different varieties are possible: They may be publicly or privately owned, cooperatively governed, locally controlled at the municipal level or maintained as a state monopoly. Regardless of form, public utilities are typically subject to higher levels of regulation and public accountability. Although not a prerequisite, these models often arise within sectors of the economy likely to be dominated by what are sometimes called "natural monopolies."

This tendency toward one large, centralized entity is based partly on the considerable high fixed costs of building such systems and partly due to greater efficiencies borne out by demand-side network effects and economies of scale. Firms in these positions frequently operate core services or infrastructures – such as electricity, water, telecommunications, and transporta-

tion systems – yielding tremendous positive externalities that democracy requires. Because such services are often expensive to maintain but essential for the public good, many societies buffer them from unfettered market forces and public utility regulation provides a set of policy tools for doing so. For example, such regulations can help guarantee reliable goods and services according to reasonable rates, non-discriminatory access, and other public interest protections.

Despite being well established in American history and mainstream legal and economic thought, some historical recovery is required to fully understand the potential vitality of public utility regulation. Drawing from a much older legal concept of "business affected with a public interest," public utility regulation emerged in the late 1800s and early 1900s as an entering wedge to curb corporate power and impose some semblance of social responsibility onto profit-driven enterprises (Novak, 2017). Central to this movement was a concern over concentrated private power and its service to the public good (Rahman, 2017).

Spanning populist and progressive antimonopoly traditions as well as more radical currents within socialist and labour movements, grassroots pressures compelled political elites to craft laws and policies to rein in and democratize monopolistic firms (Schiller, forthcoming). In recent years, a growing number of scholars from diverse intellectual backgrounds have argued for revitalizing public utility regulation to address platform-related problems.

Dan Schiller (2020), a leading telecommunications historian, shows us that the public utility concept – as he notes, never a "settled formula" – was deeply rooted in social forces from below that sought to gain democratic control over key infrastructures. While noting that the public utility model sometimes supplanted more radical efforts toward public ownership and nationalization (e.g., "postalization" of telecommunication networks), Schiller calls for a renewed and expansive framework to confront contemporary challenges. Such a reimagined concept of public utility, he writes, must be "sufficiently capacious to permit us to erect a common roof over all segments of contemporary networking: not only terrestrial, submarine, satellite, and mobile carriers, but also search, e-commerce, and social network companies."

Envisioning this "new institutional structure of public operation and control," Schiller draws inspiration from robust public institutions established throughout American history, including the Government Printing Office, the U.S. Post Office, the Smithsonian Institution, the Library of Congress, and notable others. He proposes, for example, that a properly funded national library system "can take custody over algorithms, notably for search engines," to ensure "that they are nonexploitive and non-discriminatory."

Legal scholars K. Sabeel Rahman and Zephyr Teachout likewise have made a compelling case that public utility regulation be used as a key plank within a broader antimonopoly project. They note how such regulation "has been an essential complement to antitrust and breakup strategies … to enforce critical public obligations such as common carriage, non-discrimination, rules of interoperability, and fair pricing." Ensuring that information platforms support a healthy public sphere, this model could facilitate a ban on targeted ads that would, in turn, encourage alternative revenue schemes (such as modest annual fees) more aligned with public-serving infrastructure. Ultimately, they call for structural reform as opposed to "managerialist" strategies that rely on various types of self-regulation like content moderation and privacy protections.

Structural regulations ensuring some degree of public ownership and control are necessary to protect what Rahman (2018) categorizes as "infrastructural goods and services" such as "water, finance, internet access" that are foundational to daily economic and social activity. Rahman argues that "arbitrary, exclusionary, or unfair governance of these services poses a particularly troubling problem for individuals, businesses, and communities" and thus require a special

framework that has historical and legal roots in public utilities.

Similarly, Simons and Ghosh (2020) argue that private companies like Facebook and Google that command such concentrated economic, social, and political power over our daily lives should be treated as "utilities for democracy." They call for "experimenting with different ways of asserting public power" and argue that regulating large platforms as public utilities would enable "experimenting with new mechanisms of decision-making that draw on the collective judgement of citizens, reforming sclerotic institutions of representation, and constructing new regulatory authorities to inform the governance of algorithms." More radical versions of the public utility approach can be found in the work of political theorists James Muldoon (2022), who calls for "social ownership of digital assets," and Nick Srnicek (2017), who sees the model enabling the state to invest resources necessary for transitioning corporate firms into "public platforms".

Some limitations with public utility regulation

While convincing arguments accumulate for revitalizing public utility regulation to tame run-amok platforms, other analysts have articulated legitimate concerns. Beyond standard questions about feasibility – which often serve as conversation-stoppers for any proposal that challenges industry-influenced consensus – many of these questions are practical. For example, veteran policy analyst Harold Feld (2017) cautions that we need to clearly define our terms – such as avoid conflating public utilities with common carriers or natural monopolies – and that lack of competition alone does not justify such distinctions.

Deeming something a public utility, according to Held, "has to do with the important nature of the service, and the general government responsibility to make sure that everyone has some kind of access," which justifies subsidies for electricity and telephone service to high-cost rural areas and low-income households. Indeed, ensuring access to reliable broadband services might more readily lend itself to a public utility argument (Pickard & Berman, 2019), and some scholars have suggested that platforms such as Facebook do not meet this threshold of being an essential service (Crawford, 2018). Others have critiqued the public utility argument for being too US-centric for dealing adequately with global firms (Keyes, 2022).

Moreover, different policy measures might lead to similar places. Sandeep Vaheesan (forthcoming) notes that the public utility model takes a firm's private ownership as the default position and suggests that we instead reform (or restore) the public nature of corporate charters that privilege public duties to society. Others have noted how the public utility approach shades into a technocratic framework as opposed to more democratized ownership and control. Muldoon (2022, p. 69) reminds us that "Public utility regulation adopts a top-down approach of establishing boundaries within which the business can operate … but this does not entail more wide-reaching changes in terms of workplace democracy and citizen participation."

More broadly, as with any government regulation of platforms, we must consider the perennial tensions between democratic determination and industry regulatory capture of the policy apparatus. Furthermore, any such regulatory approach risks inadvertently locking in the existing power relationships by conferring a competitive advantage to the largest platforms who can bear the added costs required to comply with potentially costly rules – from paying fines to lawyering up to legally challenge such restrictions – that smaller firms simply cannot afford.

These concerns notwithstanding, keeping the public utility model in the conversation is exceedingly important. History offers cautionary tales about what happens if we allow industry imperatives to delimit policy choices and steer our discourses in subtle but significant directions – ultimately yielding our communication infrastructures to operate under self-regulatory regimes and profit motives instead of democratic

ownership and control (Pickard, 2015). Towards preventing this historical pattern to repeat yet again, in the following I conclude with a brief discussion of more ambitious plans that go beyond public utility regulation to consider radical alternatives to today's extremely commercialized internet.

The road ahead

Regardless of what path democratic societies choose we can be certain that the status quo is unsustainable and market forces alone will not democratize the platforms – indeed, quite the opposite – necessitating government intervention. Whichever interventions we deploy, we must ensure they penetrate to the root causes of run-amok platform power. Namely, they must disrupt the unfettered market logic, the concentrations of undemocratic corporate power, and the underlying business model that makes surveillance capitalism a rational mode of digital governance and an unavoidable consequence of a profit-driven system.

What might such democratized platforms look like? They could take many forms and radical ideas for structural reform are flourishing, though one would be forgiven for not hearing about them from the constricted discursive parameters of mainstream policy debates. Beyond transitioning platforms into public utilities, we might devolve their ownership and governance to users and tech workers as cooperatives (Muldoon, 2022). Others have suggested creating an entire public stack in which each layer of our digital media – from platforms to the pipes that carry internet services into our homes – is democratized (Tarnoff, 2022).

Another set of compelling ideas are sketched out in Fuchs and Unterberger (2021) "Public Service Media and a Public Service Internet" manifesto that lays out an alternative vision for our entire digital media ecosystem, one based on enhancing democracy and privileging public need over commercial imperatives. Relatedly, Jeremy Corbyn's proposal – variations of which are espoused by British media reformers – to establish a "British Digital Corporation" as a sister organization to the BBC could also provide a public alternative to commercial platforms (2018).

Although these plans are ambitious, to say the least, it is precisely during critical junctures such as our current moment when we should advance bold, even utopian, ideas for radical social change. As such proposals gain more attention, they hopefully will broaden conversations beyond neoliberal and technocratic paradigms for platform ownership and governance. The public utility approach, despite its limitations, can begin to provide a general framework for transitioning platforms toward public ownership and control, thereby advancing a longer-term vision for a post-commercial digital media system (Pickard, 2020).

For many liberals and conservatives alike, market imperatives dictate the horizons of the social imaginary about what is politically possible. This market libertarianism has enabled the commercial capture of our communication infrastructures, elevating rich white men like Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk to use their obscene wealth against any semblance of a democratic future.

Surrendering our essential information infrastructures and communication systems to the whims of billionaires and profit-driven monopolies was always bad social policy. No democratic society should be designed this way and we must reverse course before it is too late. Today we face a crossroads: Oligarchy and technocracy from above or radical reform and democracy from below. The choice is ours. ▪

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Virtual reality, metaverse platforms, and the future of higher education

Nicole K. Stewart

"Metaverse" is an excellent word to describe the year 2022. Over the past few months, Disney hired a metaverse executive, J.P. Morgan opened a virtual lounge in Decentraland, Epic Games and Lego partnered to construct a kid-friendly metaverse, and ten post-secondary institutions across the United States are launching metaversities come fall. This article features conceptualizations around the metaverse and two Canadian higher education case studies that recently deployed metaverse platforms. In particular, I will feature a course I taught inside virtual reality (VR) at Simon Fraser University (SFU) and discuss the first moot in the metaverse hosted by the University of Ottawa. I will conclude with commentary about future possibilities and challenges of implementing VR in higher education.

The concept of "the metaverse" circulated in technology, gaming, and cryptocurrency circles long before Facebook changed its company name to Meta in 2021, ushering in a new mission to "bring the metaverse to life", and touting it as "the next evolution of social connection" (Meta, 2021a; 2021b). This shift is unsurprising because ever since Facebook acquired the Oculus

for US$2 billion in 2014, it has consistently positioned the "Oculus *as* social media" (Egliston & Carter, 2022, p. 73).

The term "metaverse" originates from Neal Stephenson's 1992 novel *Snow Crash*, which was later reimagined as the OASIS in *Ready Player One*. The metaverse – or the promise of immersive digital worlds – is often synonymous with cyberspace, entailing technologies like VR, augmented reality (AR), and artificial intelligence (AI). The prefix "meta" means "beyond" and "verse" refers to the universe. People participate in these meta-spaces as digital avatars to engage in fully immersive virtual worlds or some combination of physical and digital spaces that continue to persist even when people are not "there".

Though the metaverse is technologically possible (Han et al., 2022), some argue the metaverse won't truly exist until avatar representations can move between meta-space (Oremus, 2021). Regardless, there is an urgent need to shift away from the singularized, centralized "walled garden" Meta has framed in order to achieve the decentralized semantic web Tim Berners-Lee envisioned for web 3.0. In *Ready Player One*, Ernest Cline described the OASIS as "a new kind of fault-tolerant server array that could draw additional processing power from every computer connected to it."

Similarly, many speculate that web 3.0 will be a metaverse designed around blockchain technologies and interoperable non-fungible tokens (NFTs). Blockchain technologies have already infiltrated the economic, healthcare, and global supply chain markets. NFTs are currently being used for digital art, digital collectibles, in-game objects, domain names, and event tickets or codes; while they lack a high degree of utility at the moment, they will likely become a central disruptor in the digital economy.

The full potential of web 3.0 is still a few decades away, but experts consistently agree that it will involve digital enhancements achieved through VR, AR, and AI (Anderson & Raine, 2022). A recent report by PEW Research Center surveyed 434 researchers, activists, business and policy leaders, and technology innovators to explore visions of the internet in 2035 (Ibid). A large number of these experts focused on the transformative potential of these digital alternatives – what many describe as the true metaverse that lies ahead (Ibid). Some experts even predict that the future of the internet may include a seamless integration of physical and virtual spaces (Ibid).

Currently, when we talk about the metaverse, we are largely speaking about disconnected metaverse platforms that can be accessed across various levels of immersion, including full-immersion (head-mounted displays), semi-immersion (large projection screens), and non-immersion (desktop-based VR) (Gutiérrez et al., 2008). The more immersive the access point is to social VR, the more presence a user experiences. Presence is a subjective state influenced by the quality of immersion and level of multisensory feedback that provides the user with the sensation of *being* in a virtual environment. Metaverse platforms are similar to other digital platforms, but often have a higher degree of presence.

Common metaverse platforms include Spatial, Horizons Worlds, ENGAGE, VR Chat, Roblox, Metahero, and Decentraland. For the most part, these applications offer virtual social worlds constructed on blockchain technologies that allow users to connect inside VR for leisure, work, and school. ENGAGE (engagevr.io), a leading metaverse platform, is a publicly-traded company that was founded in 2014 as an XR studio featuring educational titles like Apollo 11 and the Titanic.

ENGAGE is accessible through VR, desktop computers, tablets, and mobile devices, and is the only social metaverse platform with ISO 27001 security certification. The platform has customizable representations (avatars), pages of virtual locations, IFX (3D objects), and a teleport function to reduce cybersickness. ENGAGE was recently used to house a 10-week Communication course about VR inside VR at Stanford University and is the same networked platform used in the two case studies below.

Teaching new media in metaverse platforms

From January to April 2022, I taught a second-year university course on technology and new media in the School of Communication at SFU from inside an Oculus Quest 2 headset (recently rebranded as Meta Quest 2) across a series of metaverse platforms including ENGAGE, Spatial, Horizon Worlds, Echo VR, Rec Room, and Oculus 360 films. While countless university courses have employed VR for exercises, simulations, and assignments, the practice of teaching an entire university course inside VR is rare, aside from the example at Stanford.

Stanford's VR course occurred in summer 2021 and was a 10-week class involving 8 30-minute VR class sessions (Han et al., 2022), while the course I taught at SFU was a 12-week class involving 10 class sessions, consisting of a 2-hour lecture *and* a 30- to 45-minute tutorial both conducted inside VR, totalling over 25 hours of time spent in the Quest 2 throughout the semester. While I had no knowledge of Stanford's course when I designed the class, both courses used the Quest 2 headset and similar metaverse platforms including ENGAGE. The Quest 2 was selected for its powerful processor, accurate motion tracking, immersive capacity, wireless nature, 1832 x 1920 pixel resolution, and its comparably lightweight frame, which students still reported feeling heavy. The majority of students opted to attend class from inside the Quest 2 headset, but students were also given the option to participate from laptops, tablets, or smartphones.

In addition to VR lectures and tutorials, students completed assignments from inside the headsets including building avatars and virtual worlds, streaming gameplay, and a class-wide research project about the ontological embodiment of learning inside the metaverse. During classes, students were encouraged to discuss course concepts, use IFX objects, make presentations from software programs like Canva, complete group work, and join me for regular field trips to virtual worlds. To discuss what it was like to take a university course inside VR, I spoke to three students about their experiences: Antalya Kabani, Darina Nikolova, and Phoenix Sage Hughes.

How would you describe our course inside VR?

Darina: We took a normal course but conducted the majority of it inside the metaverse. We had lectures and discussions in virtual lecture halls and various other rooms, as well as participated in activities to enhance our understanding of what people can really do in the metaverse.

Phoenix: VR allowed us to explore the course material in a more experiential way. Put differently, it was like we went on a field trip each day!

Antalya: The course was an unforgettable and somewhat surreal learning experience that allowed us to experience VR in a new and different context while learning about important topics regarding new media.

What was your reaction to learning about new media inside of VR?

Phoenix: My reaction to learning inside VR was a positive one as it is the perfect vessel to explore the meanings of new media.

Darina: This opportunity made for a much more immersive and engaging experience and allowed us to have a deeper understanding of the course content.

Antalya: More than anything, I was stoked. It was such a genuinely fresh and original concept and it was so exciting to be part of such an incredible group of people.

What was your favourite application?

Darina: The ENGAGE app was definitely my favourite application as I very much enjoyed the wide range of activities and uses one has while using the app. We could draw things using 3D pens, go to a seemingly unlimited number of rooms, use IFX, host meetings, attend other people's meetings, and so much more.

Phoenix: My favourite application was probably Horizon Worlds, because I was interested in world-building and how different platforms give you tools and a framework to design within.

Antalya: My favourite application was, by far, Echo VR. It was the most 'real' feeling, and perfectly captured the unimaginable feeling of being weightless in space. I often found myself flinching and extending my arms out when objects neared me, expecting the feeling of being hit but instead being presented with little vibrations in my hands.

What was your favourite experience in the course?

Darina: Undoubtedly, watching the VR documentary *Traveling While Black* was my favourite experience. Everything appeared extremely realistic and as if it was happening right in front of your eyes.

Phoenix: I really enjoyed the creativity and world-building activities that we did as a class. As an artist, I quickly became fascinated with the spatial and tactile experiences of creation. Having the ability to create and share ideas with my classmates in this way, in addition to reflecting on the experience in our first paper, was a significant part of the course for me.

Antalya: Socialising in the coffee shop was arguably my favourite experience throughout the entire process. My classmates and I had so much fun playing around with the props and interacting with each other's avatars, while 'clinking' our coffee mugs and receiving haptic feedback through the controllers. We laughed a lot in this space, and it forced me to reflect on the way our social interactions and relationships were transferred over into the metaverse.

Is there anything else you would like to share?

Antalya: Learning in VR is nothing like what you'd expect. Simply existing within VR cannot be described to one who has never experienced it. The metaverse and all its features force you to think about how we understand the technology and the world around us, and the way we have come to live in a society on auto-pilot. In a way that can't be described and can only be felt, the metaverse shows you how to disable that auto-pilot and be actively aware of your presence and existence within a space. It changes your perspective on how much power we have as humans not just within a society, but within ourselves.

Mooting in the metaverse

Midway through the semester of teaching inside VR, I was invited to sit in the public gallery for the "first moot in the metaverse", hosted by the University of Ottawa's Faculty of Law in March 2022. In partnership with LeClair and Associates and ENGAGE, the virtual legal trial was presided over by former Supreme Court of Canada Justice Ian Binnie, Justice Jodie-Lynn Waddilove of the Ontario Court of Justice, and lawyer Ron LeClair.

"I was stunned at the level of technology on display," said the Honorable Ian Binnie after sitting in the virtual courtroom as a judge from inside a Quest 2 headset, who described the experience as a bit *Star Trek*-like. "As someone who began to practice law before there were photocopiers and was amazed by wet copy machines… to emerge from that some 56 years later, to be sitting in a virtual courtroom was quite astonishing."

"This idea was conceptualized back in March 2020 when the pandemic moved all our classes online," says Ritesh Kotak, a Juris Doctor student and Tech Fellow, who recalls several moots being cancelled due to the pandemic. "I was a first-year law student and found myself on Zoom and Teams. I knew that if universities were willing to allow remote learning there may be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to be innovative in this space."

Prior to law school, Kotak worked in innovative technology roles, which is how he became familiar with the Oculus. The Quest 2 was selected for the moot because of the "price and availability," and they used ENGAGE because the platform allows "individuals to create realistic avatars" from user-uploaded images and its ability to implement an open-court principle for the public gallery through access points across multiple devices.

"I believe that these devices are a tool and making them more accessible will spark new and innovative ideas," says Kotak, who notes the participants were allowed to keep the headsets after the moot. The faculty hopes to incorporate more innovative elements into future moots (3D models, wearables, etc.).

The future of academia in the metaverse

The case studies above illustrate how VR and metaverse platforms are being employed in post-secondary institutions in Canada. The benefits of immersive, interactive, experiential learning are undeniable. "One of the biggest effects I see VR having on higher education is that it will make education a lot more accessible than it is right now," says Darina. "People could be anywhere in the world and still be present to take a university course."

"I think VR will present opportunities in the more unattainable areas of education," says Antayla. "For example, rather than having a guest speaker in a lecture, perhaps a class could visit the guest speaker in their virtual field of study and experience a more immersive and engaging learning experience. In terms of more hands-on implications of VR in the future, I think it could help with hypothetical scenarios. For example, the one activity we performed that guided us through resuscitating a new-born baby – this could be used in medical education for practical learning purposes."

The greatest hurdles of integrating VR into higher education – and other avenues of life – are related to the technology. Firstly, while the affordability, accessibility, and portability of VR/

AR are improving, these aspects are still prohibitive to many people. Secondly, while the Quest 2 offers an exceptional VR experience, higher quality, higher performance models are needed to increase retina display and pixel density to achieve even more realistic immersive experiences in VR. Thirdly, network capacities are needed to sustain VR use in public spaces (universities, workplaces, etc.). At the start of the moot, Justice Binnie was removed from ENGAGE, and it took time to add him back into the virtual trial room. In our class, the SFU network routinely kicked us out of applications. Antalya observed: "Whether it was the internet connection or simply the lack of quality of the applications we used, the technical difficulties created a noticeable barrier between the immersion levels of VR and our experiences."

The full picture of web 3.0 and the metaverse may still be decades away, but the use of metaverse platforms offers incredible immersive potential for education, work, and play. ■

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The ethics of AI and robotics

Anne Foerst

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has come a long way since the 1960 when it first appeared. When reflecting on modern AI, there are several ethical questions that come to mind. The first, most obvious one, is how to deal with the loss of jobs that will invariably be a consequence of new AI developments. Another is the question of the moral status of robots and other AI-entities. Finally, the question arises how a successful AI might challenge our understanding of ourselves. I will address these questions one by one.

There is no doubt that AI will replace humans in the job market. AI driven robots and other machines have become better and more tactile, replacing many menial tasks. The progress has been especially rapid in harvesting: produce like grapes that were always harvested by hand can now increasingly be harvested by robots. But machines have been used in factories and agriculture since the industrial revolution; today's machines can be used for more tasks but this doesn't present a qualitative change.

Where a major change is occurring right now is in the service industry. Social robots have become more autonomous, replacing jobs that would have been unthinkable to be performed by robots even a decade ago. Robot cleaners and lawnmowers are ubiquitous and dishwashing robots will follow soon (https://futurism.com/the-byte/samsung-bot-handy-dishwasher). The first robot waiters are already working with great success (https://www.abcactionnews.com/news/region-sarasota-manatee/robot-waitress-helps-local-restaurant-serve-food-during-labor-short-

age) and there are also robotic bartenders (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oo6G_Leek2w). Robots are used in childcare as playmates (https://www.wsj.com/articles/pandemic-tantrums-enter-the-robot-playmate-for-kids-11596542401). They provide companionship as caring pets for elderly people with memory problems in elderly care facilities (see Paro, the furry and snuggly companion http://www.parorobots.com/), and are so helpful that New York State just ordered hundreds of robotic caregivers as companions for the elderly in their homes to address the loneliness problem (https://www.theverge.com/2022/5/25/23140936/ny-state-distribute-home-robot-companions-nysofa-elliq).

Robots will soon replace paralegals (https://www.findlaw.com/legalblogs/greedy-associates/a-robot-already-got-your-paralegal-job/), they will work as physicians' assistants (https://www.aapa.org/news-central/2017/06/robot-will-see-now/), and have already been working for quite some time as surgeons' assistants (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robot-assisted_surgery).

I could give many more examples of AI doing jobs that we thought only humans could do. But already this array of smart machines leads to an important question. How will society change when these robots become commonplace? Optimists believe that machines will be freeing humans from demeaning tasks. These benevolent machines would then produce capital that can be distributed to humans in the form of a universal income which would make up for the loss of jobs. Pessimists on the other hand believe that – even more so than today where some tech moguls belong to the richest people on earth – better technology will concentrate money in the hands of a very few, creating injustice and widespread poverty for the rest of us.

It will be a challenge for politics to guide us into a future that will create a more equal society than pessimists envision, but we all need to speak up so that a more benevolent machine future comes to pass.

Also, while service robots such as waiters are a novelty and therefore fun to play with, when they become commonplace people will probably yearn for the times where humans served them in restaurants and bars, when kindergarten teachers took care of our children, where nurses took care of our frail elders, and where flesh-and-blood nurses weighed us and took our blood pressure. Even if we could solve the problem of just wealth distribution, is this a world we envision? Personally, I am a fan of robots and wouldn't mind encountering them in various areas but we need to decide as whole society if this is the future we want, and act accordingly.

To discuss one example in more depth, robots can replace some nursing staff in elderly care facilities as companions and can also provide companionship at home. On the one hand, it is great if technology can address the problem of many elderly people being lonely, a problem that was exacerbated by the Covid pandemic. On the other hand, we have to ask ourselves why a rich society like ours doesn't pay nurses in elderly care facilities enough so that there are way too few of them for the jobs that are available to treat today's patients. Also, why are the elderly at home increasingly isolated and lonely? If more and more jobs fall by the wayside thanks to AI, perhaps that problem will diminish as people have more time to interact with their family members and friends. This, then, might be the positive side of less jobs as people will have more time to be socially active.

Another example that needs to be discussed is online learning. The pandemic has shown us clearly that in-classroom teaching is far more effective than online teaching. In fact, we will have to deal with an education gap particularly for low-income families that has widened because of the long periods children were taught via Zoom and other learning platforms. It seems that teaching cannot be replaced by machines – not yet, I might add.

The moral status of AI

Since we face a society in which AIs will play an increasingly large role, it behoves us from an ethical perspective to ask what is the moral status

of these creatures of our ingenuity. The most important disclaimer first. Machines are nowhere near complex enough yet that they can't be turned on and off, copied, and modified. As long as this is the case, their rights are questionable but still worth considering.

Already in the early 2000s, psychologists wanted to find out to what extent we bond with machines. In one experiment, elementary school teachers and computer specialists were asked to evaluate a deliberately bad teaching program for elementary school students. After they had tested the program for a while, the computer on which they worked asked them to evaluate its performance. For the most part, people responded positively.

Afterwards, these same testers were led into another room with other computer terminals and were asked to evaluate the learning program again. Here, on these different computers, their answers were less positive about the quality of the tested software but they still sounded somewhat satisfied. Finally, a human with pen and paper asked the testers for their opinion on the software and the testers were appropriately very negative about it and all agreed that such programs should never be used in school.

The testers had not voiced these criticisms to either the computers they had tested the program on, or to the computers in the other room on which they had done a second evaluation. These same people, when asked if they would ever be polite to a computer or think they could hurt its feelings, rejected such a notion vehemently.

This experiment suggests that we seem to apply our rules of politeness to non-human entities such as computers. The participants in the experiment apparently did not want to hurt the computer's feelings. They even assumed a level of kinship between different computers and, therefore, applied similar rules of politeness on the computer on which they did a second evaluation. They didn't tell these machines their true, very critical opinion either not to hurt the feelings of the second computer by criticizing one of its "fellow computers" or because they thought that the second would tell the first what had been said.

In another experiment, people and computers were placed inside a room. Half of the computers had green monitors while the other half had blue monitors. Half of the people wore green arm badges; the other half wore blue ones. All together played interactive games and the people with blue arm badges were much more successful when using computers with blue screens to reach their goal than using "green" machines. The same, of course, was valid for the other side. So, slowly, the people with green arm badges bonded with the green-monitored machines and the "blue" people with the "blue" machines.

After approximately half an hour, the people wearing the blue arm badge expressed more solidarity with the computers with the blue screens than with the humans with the green arm badges; the same was true for the humans with the green arm badges. It seems that through the interactive games and the experienced benefit of interacting with the machines with one's colour code, the colour code took over as a definition for "my" group. The entities with the other colour code, no matter if humans or machines, tended to be rejected. Through the interactive games, communities were created that contained both human and non-human members.

It seems that somewhere during our interactions with a computer we do start to assume that a computer is as sensitive as a human. Therefore, we behave politely and don't want to criticize it openly.

We also seem to bond with the entities of our own group no matter if they are human or not. No animal has an "inbuilt" sense of species recognition which means that it is not part of our biological make-up automatically to treat all humans better than all other beings.

Humans seem to be able to accept anyone or anything into their group with whom they can sufficiently interact. As soon as such a stranger is accepted into a group, he, she, or it is seen as an equal part of the group; that group defines itself by the members that both belong and do not belong to it. After all, humans are educated from

birth on how to interact with their fellow human beings. It is necessary for a baby to be able to do so as its survival depends on it.

Throughout our lives, we learn patterns of behaviour – such as being polite and not openly criticizing someone. It is very easy to apply these ingrained rules to every entity we interact with. It is very hard to *not* do so as it demands a conscious effort of us.

The behaviour of treating non-human objects as if they deserved some form of politeness or regard and were somewhat like us is called *anthropomorphism*, the human ability to morph/change everything into a human and treat it accordingly. Usually, the term has a slightly negative connotation. Theologians especially criticize human terms used to describe God as "shepherd" or "father", or, within patriarchal structures, as an old, usually Caucasian, man with a long white beard.

The experiments described above suggest, however, that anthropomorphization is the initial and natural response to anything we interact with; it takes a conscious effort *not* to anthropomorphize. As social mammals, we are best when we interact and any use of these trained and built-in behaviours is easy; anything else is hard.

Today's machines are far more socially intelligent than the machines from 20 years ago. I often catch myself wanting to thank Alexa when it (or is it a she??) answers a question or plays the music I was just in the mood for. It is natural to do so since such social mechanisms are ingrained in us. But while I clearly bonded with my machine, I wouldn't reject an upgrade if one became available and were clearly better than the Alexa I have. But I can also understand people who have bonded with their machines so much that they would hate to give them up. Their relationship is not with an exchangeable entity but with a specific hardware to which they assign personhood.

Most accounts of personhood use the concepts of "being human" and "being a person" interchangeably and as ethical categories. Every human being deserves to be treated as a person even if he or she is incapacitated (through a disability, disease, or rejection by other human beings).

Against this position stands the opposite understanding that ties personhood solely to capability: any being can be a person when capable of symbolic processing and any being that is not capable of it is not a person. According to this scenario, people in a coma, severe dementia and similar incapacities as well as human babies are not seen as persons, while well trained chimps are.

People use the second stance when arguing against the personhood of AIs personhood as AIs cannot currently do all that humans are capable of. However, as we have seen, that gap closes more every day and with every new invention. As for symbolic processing, machines like OpenAI's Generative Pre-Trained Transformer 3 (GPT-3) (https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/15/magazine/ai-language.html) which has been around since 2020, can have philosophical discussions and would clearly pass the Turing test (the generally accepted intelligence test for machines), as conversations with it are like talking to another adult human being. So, AIs will soon pass this this test of personhood as well.

Theologically, we can understand personhood as assignment to us from God when God created us as divine statues. Rather than praying to and value a divine statue of clay, each human being is such a statue and should be treated accordingly. That means ultimately, we assign personhood to individuals not based on their capabilities but based on their interaction with us. Personhood is not assigned to a species as a whole (as we lack the recognition of this concept) but to individual beings, independent of their species or biological (or non-biological!) features. Do, therefore, all AIs have moral status? I would answer that question negatively but would at the same time argue that an individual AI can indeed be assigned moral status and the status of personhood when it has bonded with an individual human being, and that such bonds need to be respected.

There are however dangers implicit in that stance. Alexa and Siri and other agents have to

obey us and are strictly servants. They do what we want them to do. This might become a problem when we expect humans to act like Alexa and obey us as well. When we have sex with a sex bot who caters exactly to our wishes, we might forget that sex between humans is give and take, a meeting of two types of skin and two types of phantasy as Casanova put it.

In other words, social machines might spoil us for the interactions with humans who are all individuals with their own wishes and desires which makes compromises necessary. But this is not the fault of the machines but rather of human egotism where individuals want their wishes to be fulfilled without accepting that their freedom ends where the freedom of another individual begins. Machines have not yet been given the status of going against our wishes which makes their objective moral status tenuous at best.

AI and our self-understanding

With Copernicus and Galilei came the insight that the earth is not the centre of the universe. With Darwin we learned that we are related to all other creatures on this planet and belong to the family of great apes. With AI we have to learn that even our intelligence, that last holdout for human specialness, is not so special after all and can be rebuilt. This teaches us humility as we are not that special but can invite the similarities between us and other animals and between us and machines.

There is a school of thought that sees in the whole AI project hubris and self-aggrandizement. I belong to another school where AI makes us humble. It teaches us how amazing we humans really are so that we can be grateful for how wonderful we have been made. But it also teaches us humility because, despite all attempts, it still is so very hard to build something that approximates our capabilities or that of other animals.

But what else other than humility can we learn from the creatures built in our image? Early AI assumed that once we had solved the problems of chess, mathematical theorem proving, and natural language processing, we would have achieved true AI. Well...

The world champion in chess, Gari Kasparov, was beaten by an IBM machine in the late 90s. Mathematical theorem proving has long been done by machines and especially through the interactions of humans and computers. And projects like GPT-3 have solved the problem of natural language. But even much more primitive systems like Siri and Alexa are quite capable of understanding simple sentences and producing them autonomously. And yet, there is no machine (yet) like a human being who is not only capable of these feats but also of singing and dancing, laughing and crying, cooking and cleaning. We have machines that are capable of one or two of these feats, but not all of them.

First of all, there is the insight that simulating rational thought processes requires much less computational resource than performing sensorimotor functions. Intuitively that doesn't make sense to us. We find chess hard but putting butter on a slice of bread easy. For a machine it is exactly the opposite. Purely rational capabilities are relatively easy to program and machines excel at them. But physical tasks that seem easy to us because we have been doing them since birth are really hard to do for machines.

This teaches us one important thing about ourselves. Many of us are still thinking dualistically of the body as the vessel that carries the brain around, with the brain doing the heavy lifting. The search for AI teaches us how wonderful our bodies are, and that our embodied intelligence is what still distinguishes us from machines. The fact that autonomous vehicles are still not fully functional shows how embodied our intelligence is and that we take for granted our embeddedness in our surroundings, something that AIs still are not fully. Of course, we share this embeddedness with other animals, so it is our very animal nature that is hard to rebuild in machines.

In addition, current AIs are expert in one and only one task. The machine bartender cannot drive a vehicle, and Roomba and other AI-based vacuum cleaners cannot discuss poetry. The robot surgeon cannot replace a car-mechanic, and Paro

is cute but cannot make medical diagnoses.

This is why the newest front in AI is AGI: Artificial General Intelligence. Rather than building machines that are good at one task or two, the goal is to build machines that can do multiple tasks and, more importantly, can apply what they learned for one task to a different job. Because this is where humans and other animals excel at. We are universally intelligent and not single trick ponies. Here we can have another reason to be grateful for being the way we are and, yet, humbled by the difficulty of building something that comes close to the way we are. AGI is a step in the right direction but still falls far from the goal of human-like artificial intelligence.

In conclusion, I am looking forward to a world with more AI, where we interact with the results of our human imagination and creative power. At the same time, we need to be aware that on the way towards such a future we have numerous problems to solve and rebuild our society to integrate our technological children as well. ■

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Digital technologies in Palestine: Opportunities and challenges

Amal Tarazi

Ramallah-Palestine: Digital technologies are presenting exciting opportunities to facilitate the emergence of a stronger and more inclusive civil society. Around the world, active and large-scale efforts are being made to harness the full potential of digital technologies to mobilize civic action at the local, regional, and international levels. At the same time, the effects of digital technologies, especially social media platforms, have been seen on the standards and nature of public life, leaving great and sometimes complex challenges to social cohesion, security, peace, and democracy.

The growth and spread of the Internet have had an unprecedented impact on the flow of information across the world. The emergence of social media platforms in recent years has revolutionized the way we access and consume information as well as interact with and relate to others. This has presented an opportunity on the part of civil society organizations to achieve greater communication with the public and advocate for various social and humanitarian issues. On the other hand, these platforms have created new challenges at various levels, especially social.

In Palestine, like other developing countries, the need to access the Internet has increased in recent years in light of the digital revolution.

However, it is dividing people between online and offline, in addition to relying on digital technologies in the workplace, executing transactions and paying water, electricity, and telephone bills, transfer and receipt of money, education, health and other aspects of daily life.

The need for these technologies doubled with the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, the transition to remote work from home, or distance education for school and university students, and the great need for the Internet in conducting many daily transactions.

The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) indicates that about 91% of families in Palestine said that they, or one of their members, had access to the Internet at home during the first quarter of the current year 2022: 91% in the West Bank and 90% in the Gaza Strip.

The Palestinian companies that provide Internet services are now providing high-speed "Fiber Optics" to keep pace with developments in the field of smartphone applications and programs that require high speeds. Meanwhile, cellular telecommunications companies still provide third-generation internet services (3G) in the West Bank, while the Gaza Strip is deprived of these services due to the restrictions imposed by the Israeli occupation. Fourth and fifth-generation frequencies are needed to catch up with the countries of the world, many of whom have reached the fifth generation, the internet of things, and other advanced digital technologies.

As one of the oldest civil society organizations in Palestine, operating for more than 100 years, the YWCA has worked to keep pace with global technological developments by introducing modern digital technologies into its work environment and through its programs and interventions, in addition to aligning and developing its interventions with the impact of the digital revolution on the labour market, education, vocational training, and various aspects of life in Palestine.

Women's rights and interventions

The YWCA of Palestine has recently launched its strategic plan for the years 2022-2026, focusing on continuing the path the association has followed since its establishment, centring on the economic empowerment of women, just peace, and social development. The plan specifically seeks to develop interventions and tools related to entrepreneurship for women and girls, and remote work online. The plan expands the areas of public relations and external communication with international and local partners, in addition to developing lobbying and advocacy interventions for women's rights to include local and regional dimensions. The plan also calls for expanding the scope of its operational objectives to include several cross-cutting interventions.

The YWCA's path and mechanisms of action have been amended to take into account existing developments and emergency conditions witnessed by society in pursuit of continuous development and support by adapting current programs to meet existing needs. The plan takes into account new circumstances and serves the YWCA's goal of maintaining continuity of work.

Our strategic plan is based on four main objectives that represent the YWCA's key areas of focus, with the gradual development of interventions and tools, including economic empowerment of women and young women, helping them to access economic opportunities and decent work; social innovation that contributes to strengthening Palestinian youth and developing local communities; a society that practices an approach based on respect for human rights and preserving the YWCA's historic legacy and its administrative and financial sustainability.

In a related context, despite the increase in accessing smart devices and digital content, there is still a lack of resources and skills necessary to benefit from technological capabilities, as young Palestinian women who live in marginalized communities, especially refugee camps, suffer from weak civic participation at various levels. They do not have access to the Internet due to poor infrastructure, or lack of mobile phones and computers. Moreover, they are exposed to cyber-

Photo right: YWCA training course in action.

crime and do not have the resources to protect themselves and they lack sufficient awareness of digital rights and access to information.

Capacity-building for young Palestinian women

In order to overcome this challenge, in 2022 the YWCA launched a project for young Palestinian women to exercise their right to fully participate in the information society, and to know their rights in the digital age. The project aims to raise the level of young women's participation in various areas of decision-making in Palestinian society through safe civic participation on social media. It focuses on defending the rights of Palestinian refugee women and increasing their access to digital communication, and technology. The project also aims to promote safe and positive interactions on social networks for women and young women and help them fight online harassment.

The project targets young refugee women aged 18 - 30 from Aqabat Jaber camp in Jericho and the Jordan Valley governorate and Al-Jalazone camp in Ramallah and Al-Bireh governorate. It includes equipping community centres with technology devices and programs, accessories for developing digital content, providing the necessary programs, training courses in digital content development, raising awareness of the safe use of social networks and the danger of harassment, and developing ideas for designing digital content and human rights media to contribute to the current advocacy campaign of the YWCA of Palestine in the field of women's rights and their participation in decision-making. It also includes the development of guidelines on safe use, positive interaction on social networks, and protection against online harassment.

At the level of awareness, the YWCA of Palestine has launched an awareness campaign on cybercrime, especially blackmailing and harassment women and girls are exposed to through social media, under the slogan "Safe Online".

The campaign comes under "Shamal" project implemented by the YWCA through funding from UN Women Palestine, and in partnership with Ibda' Cultural Canter in Dheisheh refugee camp - Bethlehem, The Phoenix Center in Al Arroub Refugee Camp - Hebron, and the YWCA Community Center in Jalazone refugee camp - Ramallah and Al-Bireh Governorate. "Shamal" aims to promote the protection and re-

integration of women and girls subjected to violence as well as survivors in marginalized areas in Palestine by targeting refugee camps, namely Dheisheh, Al Arroub, and Jalazone.

The awareness campaign includes organizing media activities and events, conducting interviews, workshops, and meetings with decision-makers, mobilizing partners, such as community centres, human rights organizations, women's organizations, psychological and legal counselling centres, and the Palestinian police, especially Family and Juvenile Protection Unit, journalists, and influencers.

While addressing the challenges of greater digital justice for all, we have the opportunity to identify and model digital justice in education, mission, and work in human rights as well with international organizations and interfaith partners on the path of justice and peace. Several common elements stand out: The right to access information, and thus opposition to policies that interfere with or undermine this right; the need to support truth and to express vigorous opposition when what is communicated distorts the truth, reinforces negative stereotypes, or supports violent behaviour; the need for pluralism and the voicing of diverse views and to work against media concentration; the need to protect communication freedoms in the context of global economic and political structures of justice and injustice; the need to support and advocate for the right to communicate for marginalized communities and those whose voices are suppressed; the need to support alternate means of communication such as theatre, special liturgies, and local, indigenous newspapers and radio; and the need for the ecumenical fellowship to offer an alternative vision of communication, based on solidarity and sharing, mutual accountability, and empowerment.

The YWCA at a glance

The Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) is a non-profit Palestinian association established in Jerusalem in 1918 that includes an umbrella of four grassroots associations in Jerusalem, Ramallah, Jericho, and Bethlehem. The YWCA aspires to establish a free, democratic civil society that empowers women and youth to exercise and protect their political, economic, and social rights. Its work focuses on three areas including leadership and civic engagement, economic justice, and just peace. The YWCA adopts an approach that is based on human rights, thus, all our programs and lobbying and advocacy work is based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The YWCA of Palestine is affiliated with the World YWCA that works to empower women, young women, and girls in more than a hundred countries across the globe and enjoys special consultative status in the United Nations Social and Economic Council (ECOSOC). YWCAs around the globe share a common goal: "By 2035, 100 million young women and girls will transform power structures to create justice, gender equality and a world without violence and war; leading a sustainable YWCA movement, inclusive of all women." ■

Amal Tarazi is General Secretary of YWCA Palestine.

Journalism, media, and technology trends and predictions 2022

Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism

2022 will be a year of careful consolidation for a news industry that has been both disrupted and galvanised by the drawn-out COVID-19 crisis. Both journalists and audiences have, to some degree, been "burnt out" by the relentless intensity of the news agenda, alongside increasingly polarised debates about politics, identity, and culture. This could be the year when journalism takes a breath, focuses on the basics, and comes back stronger.

In many parts of the world, audiences for news media have been falling throughout 2021 – not an ideal situation at a time when accurate and reliable information has been so critical to people's health and security. A key challenge for the news media in 2022 is to re-engage those who have turned away from news – as well as to build deeper relationships with more regular news consumers.

Generational change will also continue to be a key theme, leading to more internal soul-searching in newsrooms over diversity and inclusion, about emerging agendas such as climate change and mental health, and about how journalists should behave in social media.

On the business side, many traditional news organisations remain relentlessly focused on faster digital transformation as rising newsprint and energy costs look to make print unsustainable in some countries. Charging for online news is the end-destination for many, but expect subscription fatigue to limit progress, especially if economic conditions worsen.

After a period where digital advertising revenue has leaked away to giant platforms, publishers have an opportunity to secure better results this year. Tighter privacy rules limiting third-party data, along with concerns about misinformation, have already started to swing the tide back towards trusted brands, but advertising remains a competitive and challenging business, and not every publisher will thrive.

Meanwhile the talk of platform regulation becomes real this year as the EU and some national governments try to exercise more control over big tech. However, next generation technologies like artificial intelligence (AI), cryptocurrencies, and the metaverse (virtual or semi-virtual worlds) are already creating a new set of challenges for societies as well as new opportunities to connect, inform, and entertain.

How do media leaders view 2022?

* Almost six out of ten of our respondents (59%) say their revenue has increased over the last year, despite the fact that more than half (54%) also reported static or falling page views. Publishers report that digital advertising has boomed with more people buying online, while subscription revenue has also increased.
* Three-quarters (75%) of our sample of editors, CEOs, and digital leaders say they are confident about their company's prospects for 2022, though fewer (60%) say the same about the future of journalism. Concerns relate to the polarisation of societies, attacks on journalists and the free press, and the financial sustainability of local publications.
* More publishers plan to push ahead with subscription or membership strategies this year, with the majority of those surveyed (79%) saying this will be one of their most important revenue priorities, ahead of both

Journalists at work in the media centre at COP26 as French president Emmanuel Macron addresses the conference's World Leaders Summit. Glasgow hosted the United Nations climate change conference, where world leaders gathered to negotiate a response to the ongoing climate crisis and emergency. Photo credit: Albin Hillert.

display and native advertising. At the same time, many respondents (47%) worry that subscription models may be pushing journalism towards super-serving richer and more educated audiences and leaving others behind.

* Publishers say that, on average, three or four different revenue streams will be important or very important this year. Almost three in ten (29%) expect to get significant revenue from tech platforms for content licensing or innovation, with 15% looking to philanthropic funds and foundations – both up on last year. Others are hoping to restart events businesses that stalled during the COVID-19 crisis.
* With more regulation in the air over both the market power and social impact of tech companies, there are mixed expectations that government actions will improve journalism's prospects. While around four in ten (41%) felt that policy interventions might help, more than a third (34%) thought interventions would make no difference, and a quarter (25%) said they could make things worse.
* Publishers say they'll be paying less attention to Facebook (-8 net score) and Twitter (-5) this year and will instead put more effort into Instagram (+54), TikTok (+44), and YouTube (+43), all networks that are popular with younger people. At the same time many news organisations will be tightening their rules on how journalists should behave on social media. In our survey most editors and managers feel that journalists should stick to reporting the news on Twitter and Facebook this year and worry that expressing more personal views could undermine trust.
* As the impact of climate change becomes more pressing, the news industry remains uncertain about how to deal with this complex and multi-faceted story. Only a third of those surveyed (34%) rated general coverage as good, even if they felt their own coverage (65%) was better. News editors say it is hard to get mainstream audiences to take notice of a story that moves slowly and can often make audiences feel depressed. In turn, this means it's hard to make the case to hire the necessary specialist journalists to explain and bring it to life.
* In terms of innovation, we can expect a back to basics approach this year. Two-thirds of our sample (67%) say they will spend most time iterating and improving existing products, making them quicker and more ef-

fective. Only a third (32%) said the priority would be launching new products and brand extensions. Publishers say the biggest barriers to innovation are the lack of money, due to wider economic challenges, and difficulty in attracting and retaining technical staff.

* Specifically, publishers say that they will be putting more resource into podcasts and digital audio (80%) as well as email newsletters (70%), two channels that have proved effective in increasing loyalty as well as attracting new subscribers. By contrast, just 14% say they'll be investing in voice and just 8% in creating new applications for the metaverse such as VR and AR.
* Media companies continue to bet on artificial intelligence as a way of delivering more personalised experiences and greater production efficiency. More than eight-in-ten of our sample say these technologies will be important for better content recommendations (85%) and newsroom automation (81%). More than two-thirds (69%) see AI as critical on the business side in helping to attract and retain customers.

Other possible developments in 2022

* Media companies will get bigger this year through a wave of acquisitions as they look to add scale and value to their subscription or advertising businesses. Some high-profile digital-born companies will come under new ownership.
* The growing power of the "creator economy" will continue to touch journalism this year directly and indirectly. Creator content – think celebrities and influencers – will take attention from news media, while more platform features that enable charging for content will open up opportunities for individual journalists and co-operatives.
* Short-form social video will make a comeback off the back of creator innovation in youth-based social networks. Expect publishers to adopt more of these techniques in 2022, along with the growth of streaming platforms such as Twitch, contributing to a new "pivot to video".
* Watch for more high-profile examples of journalist burnout as the stresses of the relentless news cycle, remote working, and rising authoritarianism take their toll. Media companies will explore new ways to offer support this year.
* Donald Trump's new social network, codenamed Truth Social, will inevitably attract headlines when it launches early in 2022. Expect this to be a focus for hate speech, hackers, and other disrupters
* This could be the year when publishers start working together more to counter audience and platform challenges. Look out for joint lobbying on policy, more advertising and common login initiatives, joint investigations, and more content sharing too.
* In tech, expect a proliferation of new devices including VR headsets and smart glasses, building blocks for the metaverse – as well as new ways of interacting at work. The hype over cryptocurrencies and non-fungible tokens (NFTs) will continue to build even if practical benefits remain hard to discern.

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On "shrinking space": A framing paper

Transnational Institute

Across the world, in both democratic and non-democratic states, many activists and social justice organizations face an increasingly repressive and securitized environment as well as unprecedented attacks on their legitimacy and security. From the attempts to suppress Black Lives Matter to the assassination of Berta Cáceres, the criminalization of the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement to the micro-tyranny of Bangladesh's new Voluntary Activities Regulation Act, individual and collective activism is facing a global pushback from states, corporations and the Far Right.

The current emergency has been a long time in the making. But only recently has it galvanized a concerted response by organized "civil society", which is now mobilizing to understand and counter what is termed "shrinking space", a metaphor that has been widely embraced as a way of describing a new generation of restrictions on political struggle. The concept of space itself has different definitions depending on who you talk to.

Some understand it as limited to space to influence policy (a seat at the table) while others understand its meaning as political space to organize, to operate, to have a legitimate voice, to protest and to dissent. The former tends to depoliticize contestations while the latter is empowering them. These distinctions concerning how 'space' is conceived will shape the type of response warranted, with important implications for who engages in that space and how.

This paper attempts to deconstruct the "shrinking space" narrative by explaining what it means and unpacks some of the problems inherent in the concept.[1] It also considers who is most affected by "shrinking space", and why; where the trend is headed; how it relates to the other dominant paradigms of the 21st century; and how progressive social movements may respond.

1. What is "shrinking space"?

The term "shrinking space" can be understood as a concept or framework that captures the dynamic relationship between repressive methods and political struggle, including the ways in which political struggle responds to these methods to reclaim space, and the impact this response has upon how political struggles relate to one another. Its value as a framework is that it helps us to think through common trends of repression, including their sources, effects, and mechanisms, which political actors are faced with.

Within the "shrinking space" discourse, there are at least nine often interrelated trends that constrain the political space in which civil society organizations (CSOs) operate:

(i) "philanthropic protectionism", which encompasses a raft of government-imposed constraints on the ability of domestic CSOs to receive international funding (as seen most prominently in states such as India, Russia, Ethiopia and Egypt,[2] but now found in dozens of national laws globally);

(ii) domestic laws regulating the activities of non-profits more broadly (for example by imposing onerous registration, licensing, reporting and accounting obligations on NGOs and allowing states to have limitless discretion in sanctioning organizations for "compliance" failures);

(iii) policies and practices imposing restrictions on the rights to freedom of assembly and association (for example by banning demonstrations outright, using national security laws to restrict mobilization, cracking down on unions or militarizing police forces in the name of "public order");

(iv) the criminalization, stigmatization and de-legitimization of so-called "Human Rights Defenders" (HRDs) (a term that encompasses all actors engaged in non-violent advocacy for human rights and social justice) as well as the criminalization of refugees' solidarity;

(v) the restriction of freedom of expression in general as well as online, directly through censorship and intimidation, and indirectly through "mass surveillance";

(vi) intimidation and violent attacks against civil society by religious conservatives, corporations, the Far Right or non-state actors;[3]

(vii) the decreasing space for online activism due to the repression and intimidation faced by activists, particularly women HRDs, for their work (including being subject to blackmail, slander, online harassment and stalking, as well as threats from both public/government affiliated and private sources);

(viii) risk aversion and securitization on the part of public and private civil society donors resulting in the limiting or withdrawal of funding available for both grassroots activism and marginalized causes (such as Palestinian self-determination and counter-terrorism and human rights) in favour of larger, less politicized organizations and "safer", less "controversial" issues;

(ix) the capture of spaces traditionally inhabited by CSOs by private interest groups, lobbyists, GONGOs (government-oriented NGOs) and corporate social responsibility initiatives as well as attempts to discredit CSOs;

(x) the exclusion of civil society organizations from the banking system under the guise of counterterrorism measures, which is a relatively new but escalating phenomenon in the discourse on "shrinking space".

In practice, many of these trends overlap and are experienced simultaneously, which compound the potency of their effects. For example, if an organization faces increased barriers to funding and/or loses access to funds due to their controversial work, whilst simultaneously facing greater overhead spending to respond to lawsuits and/or increased procedural scrutiny to report their activities, then the combination of these forces could be enough to shut the organization down altogether.

2. Space for whom?

If we understand the key features of "shrinking space" to include this new wave of methods to repress political struggle, then inherent within this concept are the actors who engage in political struggle. Therefore, central to understanding and evaluating the usefulness of the "shrinking space" framework/discourse, is understanding how "civil society" is defined in the first place.

Governments and philanthrocapitalists tend to view civil society through the narrow lens of incorporated/registered non-profit organizations, think-tanks and "social entrepreneurs" – to the exclusion of all others, such as social movements, informal collectives, grassroots/community-based groups, practitioners of "direct action", refugee and stateless peoples, and indigenous peoples. A much wider array of activists, initiatives and organizations self-identify as "civil society", either because they genuinely believe that they are part of a community of common interests and collective activity for social and political change, or to fit the definitions that policy-makers and funders have instituted.

Accordingly, civil society cannot be reduced to a monolithic or homogenous entity. In recognizing the range of actors and the complexity of defining civil society, it becomes clear that within this complexity are shades of shrinking space: not everyone's space is shrinking in the same way. While those engaged in the kind of highly professionalized NGO activism that is entertained and supported by the Davos class may suffer the occasional crisis of relevance, legitimacy or funding, their space does not appear to be "shrinking". Indeed many NGOs enjoy bigger platforms than ever as they increasingly become preferred partners for donors because they can swallow (due to their large size, heavy bureaucratic set-up and strong "branding") all the requirements and still have strong negotiating power.

Meanwhile, it is grassroots, commun-

Many carrying signs, people participate in a June 7, 2020, Black Lives Matter protest in Eugene, Oregon. Participants protested the murder of George Floyd and other African-Americans by police. Most protesters wore masks because of the coronavirus pandemic. Photo credit: Paul Jeffrey.

ity-based and issue-based social, economic, political and environmental justice movements that appear to be bearing the brunt of the crackdowns by authoritarian governments, violent non-state actors, and even now by democratic governments who have long since dispensed with their commitment to universal human rights and aped the clampdowns of their repressive counterparts.

Therefore, when evaluating the shrinking space framework we should at the very least begin by acknowledging that that there is not and never has been one single space in which everyone participates on an equal footing. To suggest otherwise is liberal democratic fantasy that ignores the politics and institutional biases of the public and private arenas in which different actors jostle for space, and in which a diverse range of political spaces are constantly being closed down and opened-up.

3. Why can the concept be problematic?

In many respects, "shrinking space" is simply a more nuanced and convenient way of talking about the problems of exclusion and repression that many social, political and civil rights movements have long faced. As a contemporary discourse, it clearly responds to quite novel and often sophisticated political, legal and corporate methods of containing activists and campaigners.

But the effects of the shrinking space discourse are problematic and directly harmful to certain segments of civil society. Bringing the techniques discussed above under the twin rubrics of "shrinking space" and "civil society" massively de-politicizes what is actually political policing of the highest order, shifting the focus away from the tangible repression of one kind of politics in the service of another, to something more palatable and less discomfiting. Further, the concept tends to flatten the differences in the struggles faced by social movements versus larger NGOs, inferring that all civil society actors experience the same type and degree of shrinking space, whilst simultaneously upholding the idea that the Global South is where the "real" space is shrinking.

This, in turn, has enabled the shrinking space discourse to be integrated into dominant geopolitical narratives around development and philanthropy in problematic ways. Governments of the Global North, for example, have been able to profess support for "civic space" and human rights defender initiatives in the Global South while adopting domestic policies and promot-

ing collusion with corporations that contribute to "shrinking space", and wilfully ignoring the abuses meted out by their client states and multinational corporations.

This is made possible by the discourse's overemphasis on the three key freedoms of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), namely freedom of association, assembly and expression – a narrow conceptualization that masks the intersecting dynamics that limit an individual or collective's ability to organize around pertinent matters and express themselves, such as gender, race, sexual orientation, age and others – and allows governments to selectively prioritize certain types of shrinking spaces whilst ignoring others.

Moreover, framing the repression and de-legitimization of certain quarters of civil society as some kind of vice-like device that can easily be turned in one direction or the other, carries a significant risk of both oversimplifying the problem and misidentifying the potential solutions, and also erasure and appropriation of racial and gender justice struggles.

4. One door closes…

The "shrinking space" dilemma is by its very nature characterized by groups which in practice face little more than "first world problems" speaking on behalf of those activists who never had any space to begin with – groups whose very existence has always been premised on carving out that space in the face of tremendous adversity and repression.[4]

In the struggle for space itself by the diverse array of actors, political spaces are continuously rearranged, opened up and closed down. There can be no better example of this than the burgeoning space that "shrinking space" occupies today – as evidenced by the groundswell of initiatives, conferences and funding now dedicated to it. Perversely, these new political spaces, which primarily offer large and professional International NGOs the chance to mobilize and advocate, are predicated on the very closure of more-and-more political spaces for social movements and political activists.

This framing matters a great deal. If we are to understand, and more importantly, respond in a meaningful way to the multiple problems that the concept of "shrinking space" engenders, the focus surely has to be on the spaces that are closing – so as to understand why they are closing, for whom they are narrowing, and how to reopen them.

It also suggests that one-size-fits-all solutions, such as the new Civic Charter, may be symbolically important, but are unlikely to provide any relief to those organizations and movements who face systematic repression, exclusion or annihilation.

5. "Shrinking space" as political marginalisation

An alternative to the structural abstractionism that "shrinking space" engenders is to view it as part of a wider struggle within contemporary neoliberalism to marketize the state, hollow-out democracy and reduce opposition by (re)defining the contours of legitimate, extra-parliamentary, political activity and redefining space for policy as multi-stakeholder spaces, where CSOs have to negotiate both with the state and corporations as the new mode of governance.

It has long been clear that the gatekeepers of mainstream political spaces have simultaneously co-opted and instrumentalized key civil society organizations while pushing more critical and radical civil society actors into a shadow realm where they face de-legitimization, persecution, prosecution and excessive control – with the precise aim of countering their appeal. This is reflected daily in the exclusion of many political activists and social movements from contemporary conversations with or about "civil society".

A broader process of de-legitimization is a prerequisite for the techniques of repression described above. It allows "enlightened rulers" simultaneously to claim to recognize the importance and uphold the freedom of a diverse civil society sector within their borders, while carefully managing and defining civil society from

above and on their terms. This use of "shrinking space" as a political tool is classic divide-and-rule and it pits different forms of civil society organizing against one another while seeking to break the bonds of solidarity that form the backbone of struggles for fundamental rights and social justice.

6. Degrees of separation

In terms of "shrinking space", the contemporary difference between liberal democracies and authoritarian states is not one of unbridled freedom in the former and absolute restriction in the latter, but rather is the extent to which the various constraints on civil society identified above are enforced, and against whom they are enforced. The crucial differences that do endure are found in the extent of justifications provided as freedoms are stripped and the level of meaningful protection for groups and individuals from acts of state violence that the law provides, for example in respect to physical assault, extrajudicial killing and the torture of activists and defenders. But even here the lines are constantly blurred by the introduction of more subtle techniques of repression, such as the use of "less-lethal weapons" and police tactics likes "kittling".[5]

Even in countries where new, restrictive civil society laws have caused most concern – India and Israel, for example – it is not civil society writ large that is suffering, but CSOs with particular aims and objectives. Only where civil society faces complete subjugation under the law, as is the direction of travel in the likes of Egypt and Russia, can we identify something approaching an apolitical form of "shrinking space".

Elsewhere, and without exception, the means of "shrinking space" in the government toolbox are applied selectively to suit political ends. Restrictions on foreign-funding, for example – which represent a genuine crisis of legitimacy for the funding of pro-democracy and rights-based organizations by western donors in many parts of the world – are being ruthlessly exploited by populist politicians who have taken the opportunity to bankrupt those CSOs they see as political opponents while maintaining foreign funding for uncontentious actors and programmes.

Consider also the plethora of domestic laws regulating the non-profit sector whose very raison d'être is to draw a line between bona fide and thus legitimate organizations on the one hand, and those whose activities may be called into question and thus restricted on the other. Attacks on freedom of expression and association operate in much the same way, and are invariably justified on the grounds that certain political activities may be legitimately curtailed by the state, whether under the banner of protecting the "public interest", "social cohesion", "national security" or "counter-terrorism".

Surveillance and censorship online are also predicated on the claim that those targeted have illegitimate or unlawful aims. Even the recent spate of CSO bank account closures and blocked financial transactions is predicated on legitimacy, with financial institutions claiming that the affected organizations are no longer within their "risk appetite", while they continue to provide financial services to "legitimate" actors. Ultimately, even conversations about "shrinking space" boil down to whom and what is included – and thus legitimate – whom and what is excluded.

7. Talking about a revolution

Marxist theories of the state hold that the repressive state apparatus and the ideological state apparatus work in tandem to suppress threats to the hegemonic order, first through benign forms of social repression involving the governance of individual and collective behaviour and norms, then through more violent interventions.

Yet, despite appearing more relevant than ever, notions of hegemony, repression and ideology are all but entirely absent from debates about "shrinking space". In their place is a stated concern for "democratization" and "securitization". The former attempts to defend the legitimacy of civil society in the face of shrinking space, the latter attempts to critique the direction that state policy and practice has taken with reference to

Demonstration on Lumad rights, Manila, Phlippines. Interview with Kerlan Fenagal, Chair of PASAKA, the Confederation of Lumad Organisations in Southern Mindanao. "Indigenous peoples are 14% of the total Filipino population of 110 million, so 15 million or so indigenous people in the country. The Lumad are a large group, particularly in Mindanao." Photo credit: Sean Hawkey.

culture (i.e. a culture of security predicated on a politics of fear) rather than ideology (i.e. a belief in superiority and entitlement predicated on a politics of Othering).

However, it is only by recognizing and linking the two concepts of democratization and securitization that we approach anything like a theory of "shrinking space", with securitization predicated on a "net-war" approach that includes (or others) certain civil society groups in a continuum; encompassing social movements, political activists, resistance groups and terrorist organizations, and reaching the point that it threatens the development or practice of democracy.

But this is by no means a mainstream view of "shrinking space"; nor does it explain its uneven development and impact.

8. The business of civil society

To understand "shrinking space" we should also consider trends within the "civil society" sector. In 2003, the Heritage Foundation and others started writing about the "non-profit industrial complex" and the "growing power of the unelected few". It did so, of course, with the aim of delegitimizing civil society in defence of the Bush administration, the free market and unfettered corporate profit.

And so it is with the enduring critique of the "non-profit industrial complex". The marketization of NGO activism; the counter-productive business model, at times pushed upon the sector, which favours competition over cooperation and solidarity among civil society; the focus on the individual rather than the struggle (c.f. the "human rights defenders' discourse; the idea of civil society champions; talking about 'women and girls' in place of women's rights and gender equality, etc.); the transformation of peoples' struggles into transaction-based funder-grantee relations; the corporate governance and securitization of many donors – all of this has divided civil society in ways that have expanded the space for some activities while radically restricting the space for others.

We should be mindful of whose interests we serve when we reflect on the shortcomings of civil society, but we should keep in mind the fact that all of the most fundamental social and political changes of the past 100 years, like mobil-

izing against exploitation, oppression and for an emancipatory vision, have come from not from development-oriented initiatives or top-down philanthropy but the grassroots; from people collectively organizing and mobilizing their communities to assert or claim rights.

9. A crisis of solidarity

If attempts to define "civil society" as legitimate "professionalized" organizations have always been accompanied by deliberate moves to exclude certain voices and de-legitimize other forms of political activism, then the failure to refute these definitions and resist the cosy establishment relations created when big NGOs try to distinguish themselves from smaller activist groups should be seen as part of the problem. This is because the lack of solidarity with those individual activists and political campaigns that have been exposed to demonization and criminalization, and a growing disconnect between the concerns of many mainstream NGOs and the victims of these tactics, appears to have contributed to shrinking space in a very real way.

Rather than simply looking up to the powerful to understand and counter "shrinking space" then, we should be looking to the voices and experiences of those on the margins whose political space is being obviously and radically restricted.

We should look, for example, at what is happening to the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement, launched in July 2005 by Palestinian civil society. Regardless of what you think about the merits or motivation of the campaign or its wider context, the legality and democratic legitimacy of BDS as a non-violent strategy to achieve change is irrefutable. Yet across much of the democratic world we are witnessing flagrant and relentless attempts to delegitimize and criminalize BDS. Crucially, some of these attempts have failed due to the tenacity and creativity of the resistance to adapt. It follows then that if we want to counter the criminalization of civil society in other arenas, we would do well to try to understand and build upon these successes. In other words, we should not only look at how space is "shrinking", but how that space is being defended, and by whom.

In doing so, we should look to the hard state and Far Right responses to Black Lives Matter, an entirely legitimate movement against institutionally racist police forces that has been met by increased securitization, militarization and de-legitimization. We should look at what is happening under the ongoing "state of emergency" to long-demonized Muslim communities in France post-Islamic State terrorism, and the treatment of those who speak out against the fascist turn of "laïcité". We should look at gender justice movements worldwide, which are increasingly squeezed between conservative and extremist forces on the one hand, and the paternalism of civil society regulations on the other. We should look at the criminalization of environmental activists throughout the world who believe the Paris agreement is useless without radical action against extractivism, and the fate of indigenous and other marginalized communities who are forced to make way for "development". And we should look at the fate of our most celebrated whistle-blowers and the agents of "radical transparency".

It is only from examining these stories that we can weave together a coherent and alternative narrative about shrinking space and provide the tools of resistance to those who need them most.

10. Pacification, rising fascism and beyond

Tragically, the failure to resist the criminalization and demonization of causes that address the very heart of established power, and many other perfectly legitimate forms of political activism, has paved the way for a much wider attack on individual activists, civil society, workers' unions, migrant communities and movements, by the populists and racist demagogues of the resurgent Far Right.

As a result, academics, mainstream NGOs, development organizations, independent expertise, "political correctness", multiculturalism and even the "liberal elite" are beginning to experience the kind of delegitimization that those at

the margins and radical fringes have long been subject to, and who continue to bear the brunt of the new authoritarianism.

If we are to tackle the problem of "shrinking space" and its effects on civil society, we need a better response: one that recognizes that these problems cannot be solved by lip service to human rights or some kind of "enabling environment".

We need to understand the distinct politics of the clampdown and its relationship to neoliberalism, authoritarianism, insecure bastions of power trying to regain control, and the global economic crisis (how does civil society relate to systems of power, or the 1%, or the 99%). We need to better define the problem in a way that speaks to the political, legal, physical and ideological battles at the heart of the "shrinking space" dilemma.

We need to focus on the actors mobilizing collectively, who are genuinely challenging power and who face the most serious threats – and understand their "shrinking space" with respect to those whose space is increasing. And we need to do so within a framework that recognizes that activists, and the wider social movements that they are part of, experience different levels of oppression and violence as a result of their particular identities and the wider struggles which they represent, such as combating white supremacy or violent misogyny.

We also need to take seriously the proposition that "civil society" may not be the appropriate lens to look at the wider repression of social movements, and that securitization instrumentalizes CSOs to such an extent that it may one day permanently close the door on the spaces where real change is made.

We need to put the complicity of governments and corporations front-and-centre of the fight-back by not letting them claim that they support civil society and human rights defenders while they are flagrantly repressing them at home; or subcontracting them in an effort to appear engaged in legitimate civil society activism on the ground.

Most of all we need to rediscover genuine solidarity that resurrects the principle that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere, and give visibility to those whose struggles are being repressed to the ultimate detriment of us all. ■

Source: Transnational Institute (April 2017). Reproduced with permission.

Notes

1. This paper has been produced by the Transnational Institute following a workshop on shrinking space involving representatives of its partners, networks and like-minded organizations that took place in Berlin towards the end of 2016.
2. One case in particular that illustrates 'philanthropic protectionism' is that of Case No. 173 in Egypt, in which independent human rights NGOs were investigated and targeted for receiving foreign funding without registration under a repressive law, Law 84. Thirty-seven Egyptian human rights organizations have been charged and sentenced to between one and five years imprisonment, as well as subject to asset freezes and travel bans.
3. The rise and expansion of fundamentalism beyond religion has been noted and categorized by the Special Rapporteur on the Freedom of Association and Assembly. See http://freeassembly.net/news/fundamentalism-hrc32/
4. Social movements – ranging from Black Lives Matter challenging systemic racism in the US to Chinese women's rights organizations countering gender-based discrimination to indigenous rights groups in South Africa struggling to defend their lands from agribusiness and extractive industries – are finding creative and persistent ways to reassert their rights and carve out democratic spaces of engagement and resistance. For more information, see https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/semanur-karaman-ana-cernov/our-movements-and-collective-strugglesthrive-despite-backlash
5. *Kettling* (also known as *containment* or *corralling*) is a police tactic for controlling large crowds during demonstrations or protests. It involves the formation of large cordons of police officers who then move to contain a crowd within a limited area. Protesters are left only one choice of exit controlled by the police – or are completely prevented from leaving, with the effect of denying the protesters access to food, water and toilet facilities for an arbitrary period determined by the police forces.

World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development

UNESCO

Amid the tragedy and anxiety of the global pandemic, confined to their homes, citizens around the world scanned their TVs and radios, flipped through newspapers, and scrolled down news sites and apps, endlessly searching for critical and trustworthy information. How was the government responding to the pandemic? Was it safe to go to work or shop for food? When would a vaccine be available? Not everyone found the information they needed.

Often, news media struggled to keep up with the demand – a task made all the more difficult by accelerated declines in revenue and limited capacity, especially for local newspapers and outlets in the Global South. Some media failed to live up to professional quality standards. And some audiences instead found disinformation: myths, rumours, and outright lies, and in such quantities as to be dubbed a "disinfodemic", a pandemic of non-verified or misleading information. Such falsehoods – spread intentionally or not – sowed confusion, division, and discord, impacting lives and livelihoods around the world.

"The ability to cause large-scale disinformation and undermine scientifically established facts is an existential risk to humanity," noted United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres in his report Our Common Agenda. "While vigorously defending the right to freedom of expression everywhere, we must equally encourage societies to develop a common, empirically backed consensus on the public good of facts, science, and knowledge."[1]

False content related to the COVID-19 pandemic spread rapidly on social media, at times amplified by unscrupulous or misguided public figures. In September 2020, for instance, over 1 million posts were circulating on Twitter with inaccurate, unreliable, or misleading information related to the pandemic.[2] Facebook also reported that, from the start of the pandemic to August 2021, it had removed over 20 million posts on Facebook and Instagram for promoting COVID-19-related misinformation.[3] These waves of mis- and disinformation were also often accompanied by high volumes of hate speech.

In this context, journalism provided an essential – and life-saving – frontline service throughout the pandemic by informing the public, holding duty bearers to account, and debunking the onslaught of disinformation. For example, in March and April 2020, a network of more than 100 fact-checking organizations and news outlets around the world were busy debunking as many as 1,700 false claims per month related to COVID-19.[4] The life-and-death consequences of COVID-19 disinformation provided a reminder that the resilience of our societies depends upon quality journalism, access to information, and media and information literacy. These principles have been recognized through the 2020 Seoul Declaration on Media and Information Literacy for Everyone and by Everyone: A Defence against Disinfodemics and many other statements marking commemorations of World Press Freedom Day and the International Day for Universal Access to Information.

A free, pluralistic, and independent media, a global normative standard since the early 1990s, has remained as relevant as ever. These principles were connected to additional imperatives in the 2021 Windhoek+30 Declaration on information as a public good. This initiative recognised the urgent need to address both the economic viability of media outlets whose sustainability is

under great stress and the transparency of internet companies about how they treat content on their services.

While trusted news sources saw a surge in readership and viewership during the global crisis, in many ways, journalism has emerged weaker. The pandemic delivered a massive blow to the already shaky economic foundations of the news media industry, intensifying a trend in declining advertising revenue, job losses, and newsroom closures. It also provided cover for press freedom violations. Research by the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute finds that COVID-19 measures have justified significant press freedom violations in every region of the world, including in 96 out of the 144 countries in its 2021 study.[5]

In this context, the World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development: Global Report 2021/2022 (World Trends Report) compiles the grim evidence that the current supply of journalism—which was already insufficient to meet the need in many societies (and often existing against huge odds)—can no longer be taken for granted. The findings are grounded in data-driven analysis, conducted by UNESCO in partnership with the Data-Pop Alliance, of trends in media freedom, pluralism, independence, and the safety of journalists, and supplemented by original research by Economist Impact commissioned for this Report.

With a special focus on journalism as a public good, the 2021/2022 World Trends Report is designed to serve as a key resource for UNESCO Member States, international organizations, civil society, media, and academics.

Press freedom around the world

Thirty years ago, the 1991 Windhoek Declaration, adopted by journalists from across the African continent at a seminar organized by UNESCO, marked the beginning of a remarkable expansion of freedom, pluralism, and independence in news. That expansion owed much to the liberalization of media markets. However imperfectly, the fuel of advertising, copy sales, and subscriptions furnished many outlets around the world with the resources and independence they needed to bring audiences trustworthy information. Today, that blueprint is in tatters.

These norms in favour of freedom, pluralism, and independence for media are still essential—but alone they do not address the current challenges of mis- and disinformation, journalism's failing business model, or growing digital tactics that suppress independent journalism and democratic dissent online. Without viability, media freedom is hollow, independence can be easily compromised, and pluralism becomes a shadow of what it should be. Without transparency of internet gatekeepers, their role in communications cannot be assessed and brought into better alignment with international freedom of expression standards. And without media and information literate citizens, who can discern, cherish, and demand quality journalism, the risks are high of being overrun by other kinds of content.

How our societies cope with this moment of crisis and transformation should be judged by how well we are delivering on the "establishment, maintenance, and fostering of an independent, pluralistic, and free press" under these new conditions. Action is needed if our future is to trend towards what the Windhoek+30 Declaration recognises as a world in which "information empowers citizens to exercise their fundamental rights, supports gender equality, and allows for participation and trust in democratic governance and sustainable development, leaving no one behind".[6]

Journalism is a public good

"The theme of this year's World Press Freedom Day, 'Information as a Public Good', underlines the indisputable importance of verified and reliable information. It calls attention to the essential role of free and professional journalists in producing and disseminating this information, by tackling misinformation and other harmful content."[7]

Within information as a public good, journalism is central. As verified news in the public

interest, journalism itself can be characterised as a public good. Public goods are generally defined as essential services or commodities – such as schools, roads, street lighting, and parks – available to everyone in society without exclusion. Because these goods are frequently expensive to produce while offering little financial return, states often play a role, directly through funding or indirectly through regulation, in ensuring their provision.

Like other public goods, journalism plays a critical role in promoting a healthy civic space. It does so by providing citizens with trusted and fact-based information that they need to participate in a free and open society. Journalism simultaneously acts as an independent watchdog and agenda-setter. But for journalism to function as a public good, it needs to operate under politically and economically viable conditions so that it can produce independent, high-quality, and trustworthy news and analysis.

In countries with high-quality public service media – distinct from state-controlled broadcasting –independent journalism is explicitly provided as a public good. Taxation, license fees, or other subsidies support these news outlets with a mandate to provide quality information to the general public. Genuine public service media, however, are invariably under pressure to serve governments or business interests, and particularly vulnerable to capture. Further, public service media are not in themselves sufficient for achieving media pluralism, which requires a diversity of funding models as well as both competing and complementary media institutions, including commercial and community media. Even so, genuine public service media remains a key way for journalism to serve as an essential public good.

However, in the increasingly crowded attention economy, the traditional business models of many media institutions across the spectrum are in crisis. Globally, newspaper sales continue to decline. News outlets struggle to get the "clicks" that determine advertising revenue, and many find themselves further squeezed out by the proliferation of new voices in the online space and the algorithms of digital intermediaries. The digital ecosystem has unleashed a flood of competing content and turned large internet companies into the new gatekeepers. The number of social media users nearly doubled from 2.3 billion in 2016 to 4.2 billion in 2021, allowing for greater access to content and more voices – but not necessarily that with the distinctive value-add of journalistic content.[8]

The picture is one where advertising revenues have shifted rapidly toward internet companies and away from news outlets. Two companies, Google and Facebook (recently rebranded as Meta), now receive approximately half of all global digital advertising spending.[9] According to data from Zenith, in the last five years, global newspaper advertising revenue dropped by half; when analysed over the past ten years, that loss is a staggering two-thirds.[10] This has had heavy implications for audiences worldwide in search of trustworthy local news sources who have been left in "news deserts". When communities lose their local news sources, levels of civic engagement suffer.

In the face of these trends, journalists and their allies are experimenting with innovative ideas, techniques, and operational models for sustaining the viability and independence of news. From tax credits and direct subsidies to philanthropic funding and non-profit models (also building upon the experiences of community radio), innovative funding models are already emerging, including for supporting public interest media. Some outlets have also placed greater focus on subscription or membership models to collect revenue directly from their audiences. Networks such as the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, and Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism are finding ways to work more efficiently (and safely) together. Several efforts are underway to develop online trust-verification tools for readers, platforms, and advertisers to better identify and privilege trustworthy sources. Emergency support to

the media was availed under the pandemic in a number of countries.

While no single blueprint or solution will suffice in every context, a number of approaches and options can be considered. To safeguard journalism's function as a public good, urgent action is required from governments, civil society, and the private sector to bolster trustworthy journalism and create a better enabling environment for media viability while respecting standards of editorial independence and freedom of expression. Without this, it will not be possible to ensure – and expand – the supply of journalism as a public good within the ever-burgeoning communications mix.

Trends in media freedom, pluralism, and independence

The financial crisis in the news industry has been compounded in the last decade by the erosion of press freedoms, which have declined measurably since 2012. According to UNESCO data, at least 160 countries still have criminal defamation laws on the books. These laws are finding new life through Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation and "libel tourism", in which individuals take advantage of the legal system of a foreign country to more easily file a libel lawsuit against a journalist or a media company, for example. Additionally, at least 57 laws and regulations across 44 countries have been adopted or amended since 2016 that contain overly vague language or disproportionate punishments that threaten online freedom of expression and press freedom.

Beyond the new legal measures, the last five years have witnessed a rise in other actions that threaten global efforts to safeguard freedom of expression and internet universality (for a human rights-based, open, and accessible digital ecosystem governed through multi-stakeholder participation). News services have been blocked online, journalists illegally spied upon, and media sites hacked.

Internet shutdowns – when governments restrict internet, mobile networks, or social media access for large swaths of territory – reached a peak of 213 unique incidents in 2019.[11] Some governments are also investing in their capacity to "filter" and "throttle" the internet, blocking certain kinds of content or slowing down access to discourage users from seeking information online. In the last five years, government requests for content removal on major internet platforms have doubled.[12]

Beyond the actions of governments, private internet companies are facing increased scrutiny into how they deal with speech that is not protected under freedom of expression standards, and how they use personal data to impact what users see in their search results, content feeds, and recommendations. As part of growing multi-stakeholder support for enhanced transparency as a means of increasing accountability, UNESCO has set out a selection of 26 high-level principles that can serve as a guide to companies, policymakers, and regulators.[13]

Highlighting a positive trend for information as a public good, at least 22 UN Member States have adopted constitutional, statutory, and/or policy guarantees for public access to information since the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted in 2015, bringing the global total to 132 UN Member States as of August 2021. Owing to the efforts of civil society organizations around the world and the commitment of governments and international and regional bodies to the principle of openness, the number of countries with such laws has more than tripled in less than 20 years. Increasing numbers of countries are submitting data to UNESCO's annual monitoring of the Sustainable Development Goal Target 16 on "public access to information and fundamental freedoms".

Access to information is increasingly synonymous with access to the internet. In Target 9.C, the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development aims to significantly increase access to information and communication technologies and strives to provide universal and affordable access to internet in least developed countries.[14] Through this and other international commit-

ments, access to the internet has indeed expanded rapidly, from approximately 30 percent of the world's population in 2010 to over 50 percent in 2019.[15] Over the last five years, however, the growth of internet access has slowed as markets struggle to provide service to the world's poorest populations and amid enduring digital divides in some regions, evident in disparities based on issues such as gender, age, socioeconomic status, and urban-rural divides, among others.

For the achievement of equality envisioned by the Sustainable Development Goals, the full participation of women in the public sphere is imperative, which in turn implicates gender issues in the supply, character, and access to information. Unfortunately, by many measures, progress towards gender equality within news media has continued to stagnate in the last five years. The Global Media Monitoring Project, which has tracked women's marginalization in news media every five years since 1995, estimates that at current pace, it will take another 67 years to close the average gender equality gap in traditional news media.[16]

Pluralism of the media is also increasingly threatened by the deterioration of journalism's traditional business models, which has made newsrooms more vulnerable to pressures from both external actors and outlet owners and executives. This form of media capture – when news media are ostensibly free yet compromised in terms of independence – continues to be a growing threat. For instance, a recent study by the Center for Media, Data, and Society of 546 state-administered media entities in 151 countries found that nearly 80 percent of them lacked editorial independence.[17]

The issues of disinformation and media capture have contributed to patterns of declining trust in news media so widespread as to stoke concerns of a "post-truth era" in which citizens eschew facts for content that instead appeals to their emotions or political beliefs. This bodes poorly for the sustainability of mainstream media and for democratic politics, which depend upon some common ground of shared facts among competing interests. Growing concerns over these trends, however, have also bolstered international awareness of and commitment to media independence and of media and information literacy as a tool to address negative trends related to disinformation, hate speech, and other harmful content.

Meanwhile, mis- and disinformation have become a major threat to information as a public good, with internet companies serving as vectors and even accelerants. A study conducted by Massachusetts Institute of Technology researchers using Twitter data found that falsehoods on that platform "diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth".[18] And in a poll conducted by Gallup in 142 countries in 2020, 57 percent of internet users said they were worried about receiving false information.[19] In June 2020, more than 130 UN Member States and permanent observers, acknowledging such risks, called for new human rights-based measures to counter the spread of disinformation.[20]

While more action is needed to contend with disinformation, caution is in order. As underlined in the ITU/UNESCO Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development report entitled *Balancing Act: Countering Digital Disinformation while respecting Freedom of Expression*, it is of vital importance that such responses respect norms and international frameworks for freedom of expression and promote an enabling environment for a free press to operate without restrictions.[21]

Trends in the safety of journalists

Hostile actors continue to threaten journalists with killing, kidnapping, enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention, and torture—simply for doing their jobs. From 2016 to the end of 2020, 400 journalists were killed for their work or while on the job. Though this is a slight decrease compared to the previous five-year period, during which 491 journalists were killed, recent years have shown the importance of considering threats against journalists in a holistic sense. Other repression methods appear to be rising at

record levels, including arbitrary detention and imprisonment and threats of violence online and off-line. According to data from the Committee to Protect Journalists, 274 journalists were imprisoned in 2020, the highest yearly total in three decades.[22] Additionally, over the past five years, out of all killings of journalists, the proportion that occurred outside of countries experiencing armed conflict has been steadily rising, from 50 percent in 2016 to 61 percent in 2020.

International organizations, civil society, and researchers have also given greater attention recently to threats, including various forms of online violence, which inordinately affect women journalists and those who represent minority groups. A 2020 survey of 714 women-identifying journalists from 125 countries, conducted by UNESCO and the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ), found that 73 percent had experienced online violence in the course of their work.[23] The last few years have also seen numerous expulsions of foreign correspondents and attacks on journalists covering protests. From January to August 2021, UNESCO registered attacks against journalists in connection with the coverage of protests, demonstrations, and riots in at least 60 countries in all world regions. Since 2015, at least 13 journalists have been killed while covering protests.

Impunity for killings of journalists remains a serious concern: only 13 percent of cases recorded by UNESCO since 2006, or approximately one in ten, are currently considered judicially resolved. UNESCO research conducted for the Report further confirms that where the number of journalist killings is high, so too is impunity for these killings, threatening a continued cycle of violence as lethal crimes against journalists often go unpunished.

The COVID-19 pandemic created new challenges for the safety of journalists and exacerbated existing ones. Even as journalists were broadly recognized as essential workers during the crisis, they faced increased harassment, psychological stress and trauma, and an elevated risk of contracting the virus. According to the non-governmental organization Press Emblem Campaign, at least 1,846 journalists died after contracting COVID-19 between 1 March 2020 and 1 November 2021.[24]

In response to these myriad challenges, UNESCO and others have worked to raise awareness of the threats to journalists and led numerous efforts to protect them over the past five years. Between 2016 and 2021, 28 resolutions and decisions on journalists' safety have been adopted by the UN General Assembly, the UN Human Rights Council, UNESCO's governing bodies, and regional bodies. An indicator on the safety of journalists (SDG indicator 16.10.1) has also been established to measure achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. UNESCO has also strengthened the capacities of over 23,000 judicial actors and 8,500 members of security forces around the world on freedom of expression, access to information, and safety of journalists, and published numerous vital resources and safety guides in cooperation with Reporters Without Borders, the International Federation of Journalists, and others. The past five years have also witnessed a proliferation of efforts in response to the gender dimension of journalists' safety, including civil society initiatives such as the Coalition Against Online Violence, UNESCO's #JournalistsToo campaign, and growing attention to national-level support mechanisms for women journalists.

National protection mechanisms for the safety of journalists are being implemented in numerous countries, while existing protection mechanisms have also been continuously updated, particularly to better address gender-based threats. Other Member States have also launched national action plans on the safety of journalists, including gender-based and digital threats.

Future directions in press freedom

While accounting for the grim tally of setbacks, this World Trends Report highlights a groundswell of efforts to preserve press freedom and to protect the safety of journalists around the world. In 2019, the United Kingdom and Canadian

governments launched the Media Freedom Campaign, triggering the creation of a coalition of governments and working in partnership with civil society organizations. High-level representation at two conferences has yielded new pledges, including the creation of the Global Media Defence Fund. In the 2020 Hague Commitment to Increase the Safety of Journalists, almost 60 signatories committed to implementing the United Nations Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity. The Forum on Information and Democracy has garnered 43 state endorsements of a declaration calling for sweeping reforms to provide a "New Deal" for journalism. A newly created International Fund for Public Interest Media further underscores how the media sector has become a growing priority for bilateral, multilateral, and private donors.

The informal Groups of Friends on the Safety of Journalists have continued to bring together Member States that share a commitment to the strengthening of the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity and its implementation at the national level. On the occasion of World Press Freedom Day 2021, the Groups issued a Joint Statement stressing the critical role of Member States in supporting a free press.[25] The Freedom Online Coalition, a partnership of 33 governments, has recently rekindled its efforts to support internet freedom and protect human rights online. Additionally, since 2013, UNESCO's Judges' Initiative has raised the capacities of judicial actors on international and regional standards on freedom of expression, access to information, and the safety of journalists in regions across the world. Over 23,000 judicial actors, including judges, prosecutors, and lawyers, have been trained on these issues, notably through a series of massive open online courses (MOOCs), on-the-ground training and workshops, and the publication of a number of toolkits and guidelines.

At the national level, the impact of these international efforts may remain geographically skewed. In countries with large advertising markets, institutionalized forms of public service media, well-established traditions of press freedom, and political influence over the governance of internet platforms, among other factors, such efforts are more likely to succeed. In poorer countries and at the local level, the news crisis will be more difficult to address without a new concerted push with international support.

A major impediment to those contextually specific solutions for journalism, however, remains in the form of significant data gaps. In the countries and communities where journalism remains the most beleaguered, the health of the news system can be a black box. Efforts to fill the data gaps are important first steps toward more inclusive solutions.

Indeed, those working to promote freedom of expression and media development are already innovating their work through the use of data, in both new and old forms, but much remains to be done. Following a mapping of more than 150 data sources from 120 organizations, the Report identifies priority data gaps and presents a framework focused on the following four dimensions: Availability; Accessibility; Utilization; Stability.

The full global edition of the World Trends Report puts forward recommendations for how these gaps can be filled through collaborations among governments, civil society, and the private sector. Greater commitments to transparency by the major internet companies will be a key element for designing evidence-based policies that enhance the enabling environment for the funding and dissemination of journalism.

A call for action

The troubling trends in media freedom, pluralism, independence, viability, gender equality, and safety of journalists highlighted in this Report should be a call to redouble efforts.

Without urgent action by governments, civil society, and private companies, trustworthy journalism will remain under threat, and information as a public good severely under-nourished.
Without media and information literacy and internet transparency, humanity may be diverted

away from addressing the real problems of sustainable development and securing human rights more broadly.

New forms of self-regulation by news producers, new regulations for social media platforms, state subsidies to trustworthy news outlets and greater support for public service media, increased media development assistance, a redoubling of philanthropic investments, all while steadfastly guarding standards of editorial independence and freedom of expression: these are just a few of the measures that may be required to ensure that journalism can continue to function as a necessary public good.

Independent journalism – the kind that favours public interest over political, commercial, or factional agendas – is in peril. The rapid erosion of the business models underpinning media sustainability has deepened a crisis in the freedom and safety of journalists around the world. The global response to these challenges in the coming decade will be decisive for the survival of a democratic public sphere.

Over the past five years, approximately 85 percent of the world's population experienced a decline in press freedom in their country. Even in countries with long traditions of safeguarding free and independent journalism, financial and technological transformations have forced news outlets, especially those serving local communities, to close. With readership and advertising markets moving online, advertising revenue for newspapers plummeted by nearly half in the ten-year period ending in 2019. The subsequent COVID-19 pandemic and its global economic impact have exacerbated this trend, now threatening to create an "extinction level" event for independent journalism outlets.

The 2021/2022 global edition of the flagship series of reports on *World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development* examines these questions within the wider framework of "journalism as public good". The findings are grounded in data-driven analysis, conducted by UNESCO in partnership with Data-Pop Alliance, of trends in media freedom, pluralism, independence, and the safety of journalists, and supplemented by original research by Economist Impact commissioned for this Report. ▪

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Joint Declaration on Freedom of Expression and Gender Justice

The United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Representative on Freedom of the Media, the Organization of American States (OAS) Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information:

Having discussed these issues together with the assistance of ARTICLE 19: Global Campaign for Free Expression and the Centre for Law and Democracy; Recalling and reaffirming our Joint Declarations;[1]

Underlining the critical role that the right to freedom of opinion and expression plays in the promotion and protection of human rights and dignity, the advancement of sustainable development, and the supporting and strengthening of democratic societies;

Highlighting that freedom of expression is critical for women's empowerment, equality, enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights, as well as for civil and political rights, and full participation in public life;

Noting that gender equality and the right to freedom of opinion and expression are mutually reinforcing, indivisible and interdependent;

Emphasising that gender justice signifies transformative changes to remove structural and systemic barriers and create an enabling environment in which women (and others who suffer

discrimination on account of sex or gender) can exercise their rights and participate fully and equally in the private, public and political sphere;

Recognising the importance of the internet and digital technology in bolstering freedom of expression and access to information globally, and promoting the empowerment of women and others who experience discrimination and marginalisation;

Deploring the structural obstacles, including sexual and gender-based violence, misogyny, entrenched bias, social prejudices, patriarchal conventions, and interpretations of cultural and religious norms, as well as discriminatory laws, policies and practices and unequal access to digital technology and participation in the media that prevent women's equal enjoyment of freedom of expression;

Deeply concerned that online gender-based violence, gendered hate speech and disinformation, which cause serious psychological harm and can lead to physical violence, are proliferating with the aim of intimidating and silencing women, including female politicians, journalists and human rights defenders;

Condemning online attacks and harassment of women journalists as one of the most serious contemporary threats to their safety and damaging to media freedom;

Noting that independent, free, pluralistic and diverse media are essential in a democratic society and that gender inequality diminishes media pluralism and diversity;

Alarmed at the increasing use of frivolous and vexatious lawsuits to dissuade women from participating in public life or from speaking out against alleged perpetrators of sexual and gender-based violence;

Recognising the need for inclusion and sensitivity to the intersectionality of gender and other characteristics that cause or exacerbate women's experience of discrimination, including race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, age, legal and socio-economic status or other factors;

Noting that both sex and gender have been the basis for inequality and discrimination in the exercise of freedom of opinion and expression and that while the Declaration focuses primarily on women, where appropriate, reference is made to gender non-conforming people (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning or LGBTQ+ individuals);

Noting further that the term "women" in the Declaration also refers to girls in the appropriate context;

Adopt, on 03 May 2022, the following *Declaration on Freedom of Expression and Gender Justice*.

Elimination of discrimination and prejudice

States are obliged under international law to proactively remove the structural and systemic barriers to equality as well as discriminatory laws, policies and practices that impede women's full enjoyment of all human rights, including the right to freedom of opinion and expression. The obligation entails positive duties to eliminate gender stereotypes, negative social norms and discriminatory attitudes in society through education programs, social policies, cultural practices, and laws and policies that prohibit discrimination and sexual and gender-based violence and to promote equality and inclusion.

Eliminating discrimination against women requires a "whole of society" approach. States, the private sector and civil society should work together to address discrimination, stereotyping and interpretations of culture, religion and tradition that subordinate and disempower women and are a root cause of sexual and gender-based violence as well as gendered censorship.

States should protect and promote the participation and equality of women in the media sector through laws, policies and practices that protect the safety of women journalists, incentivise gender equality and encourage and protect expression by and about women.

Media outlets and companies should take targeted measures to increase women's representation as managers, journalists, media workers, sources, experts and interviewees in the news. Through coverage, analysis, professional codes,

8 March 2016, Umeå, Sweden: Hundreds of Umeå residents marched through the city centre, marking International Women's Day and proclaiming equal rights for all. Photo: Albin Hillert.

professional development of women journalists and media workers, and other means, the outlets and companies should play a transformative role in dismantling gender stereotypes and opposing gender bias and violence against women and gender non-conforming people.

Internet intermediaries should be particularly mindful of the way that their services, automated or algorithmic processes and business practices to increase user engagement, target advertising or engage in profiling may amplify gender stereotypes, bias, misogyny and gender-based violence. Companies should ensure that their content moderation and curation policies and practices do not discriminate on the basis of gender or other protected attributes.

Furthermore, women and intersecting marginalised groups are often underrepresented or misrepresented in data that companies use, which is a factor in amplifying gender inequality, stereotypes, bias, misogyny and online gender-based violence in automated and algorithmic processes. Companies should ensure that data upon which automated or algorithmic processes rely are representative.

Access to information

Access to information is critical to women's agency and empowerment and lies at the core of the right to freedom of opinion and expression. States should accelerate and enhance their efforts to close the gender digital divide and ensure that women have affordable, open, secure and high-quality access to the internet without restrictions or shutdowns. To be impactful, such measures should also address political, socio-economic, linguistic and cultural barriers that prevent women's equal access to information communication technology.

States, internet intermediaries and civil society organisations should encourage and proactively support the digital and information literacy of women and girls.

States should facilitate access to information and ideas of all kinds by and about women and gender non-conforming people, including on sexual and reproductive health, gender roles, education, employment opportunities, and economic data. Given the importance of social inclusion, diversity and democratic participation, States should pay particular attention to protecting the full and free expression and access

to information of women and gender non-conforming people.

States should ensure that gender-disaggregated data is collected and made publicly available on all matters of government policy and practice which impact women's political participation, socio- economic development and human rights. Attention should be paid also to ensuring the availability of gender-disaggregated data on digital inclusion and participation in the media.

Gender-specific restrictions on expression

Any restriction of freedom of expression should meet fully the three-part test of lawfulness, legitimate objective, necessity and proportionality, as set out in Article 19(3) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

States should not use the aim of protecting public morals to restrict gender, sexual, cultural or artistic expression of women and gender non-conforming people based on principles derived exclusively from a single tradition. Neither a claim of protecting public morals nor the paternalistic excuse of protecting women and girls should be used to enshrine particular views of sexuality or gender roles or suppress diverse views. The principle of necessity and proportionality requires that any limitation for the reason of protecting public morals should consider the universality of human rights, the principle of non-discrimination and the international human rights standards of sexual, gender and cultural diversity, including the protection of speech that may be offensive, shocking or disturbing to others.

States, as well as public and private academic institutions, should respect academic freedom of expression and refrain from censoring, restricting or discriminating against gender studies and feminist scholarship or public debate on these issues.

Women who publicly denounce alleged perpetrators of sexual or gender-based violence should not be charged with criminal libel, prosecuted for false reporting of crimes or be subjected to frivolous or vexatious defamation lawsuits. When women speak out about sexual and gender-based violence, States should ensure that such speech enjoys special protection, as the restriction of such speech can hinder the eradication of violence against women. States should decriminalise all defamation and insult actions, and enact comprehensive legislation to discourage vexatious or frivolous defamation cases and strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) that are intended to intimidate and silence women and drive them out of public participation.

Online sexual and gender-based violence

The prohibition against sexual and gender-based violence applies online as well as offline. Online violence against women has particular significance for freedom of expression as it encompasses harmful speech as well as behaviour facilitated by digital technology, including threats of physical or sexual violence, online bullying and stalking, doxing, harassment, targeted electronic surveillance, coercion and non-consensual exposure of intimate images.

Sex and gender should be recognised as protected characteristics for the prohibition of advocacy of hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence under Article 20(2) of the ICCPR, and Article 4 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. Misogyny should be prohibited if it reaches the threshold set by Articles 19(3) and 20(2) of the ICCPR.

States should enact specific legislation or update existing laws to prohibit, investigate and prosecute online sexual and gender-based violence. The legislation should be grounded in international human rights standards on freedom of opinion and expression as well as on gender equality. Law enforcement officials and support services should be trained to recognise and respond to the distinct gendered nature of online violence and the heightened risk of physical violence arising from them.

In consultation with media organisations and representatives of women journalists, States

should develop and implement integrated prevention, protection, monitoring and response mechanisms to ensure the safety of women journalists. State officials should publicly condemn any attack on female journalists and should refrain from making statements that could put women at risk.

Social media platforms have an obligation to ensure that online spaces are safe for all women and free from discrimination, violence, hatred and disinformation. Companies should improve their transparency and content governance, provide users with safety tools, make it easier to report online violence and create direct, easily accessible routes for the escalation of complaints. They should ensure that the relevant teams have the necessary expertise on gender-based violence and the cultural context.

Media companies should ensure the safety of female workers by adopting policies and processes to address sexual and gender-based violence and harassment in both the external and internal work environment, involving women in creating these processes and policies, and providing psychosocial and digital security support, legal assistance, and training and protocols for all staff.

Gendered disinformation that does not constitute incitement to violence or hatred should be addressed through non-legal and multi-stakeholder strategies implemented by States, companies and civil society, including public education, community awareness, digital, media and information literacy, de-incentivising the spread of disinformation on social media platforms, fact-checking and fostering of diverse and credible sources of information including independent media, and legal, social and digital safety support to empower and build the resilience of those at risk.

Human rights due diligence

In line with the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, as a matter of due diligence, all companies should carry out regular human rights and gender impact assessments to identify and mitigate systemic risks to women's human rights posed by their business model, user engagement practices, advertising, targeting or profiling practices, as well as their content moderation and curation, and data collection and privacy practices.

Internet intermediaries should design processes and outcomes that respect and uphold women's human rights, using diverse and inclusive teams to create tools, technology and content. They should develop and enable secure digital communications, strong encryption, and anonymity-enhancing tools, products and services. They should empower women with the means to protect their privacy and security, control what data is collected from them and to whom it is distributed as well as what data they choose to receive.

Internet intermediaries should make their policies on non-discrimination, gender equality and safety from online violence publicly available, and explain their practices, decision-making processes, the operation and impact of automated processes and algorithms they use, their appeals processes, and their remedies for abuse, bias or discrimination in non-technical terms and make them easily accessible to all users in local languages.

States should ensure the safety and participation of women in online platforms, including through strong data protection regulations, and regulations to enhance the transparency, due process and human rights due diligence of companies.

Women, in all their diversity and intersectionality, should be included when policies, laws, treaties, community standards, technology and regulations are being discussed, designed and adopted. ■

Note

1. Of 26 November 1999, 30 November 2000, 20 November 2001, 10 December 2002, 18 December 2003, 6 December 2004, 21 December 2005, 19 December 2006, 12 December 2007, 10 December 2008, 15 May 2009, 3 February 2010, 1 June 2011, 25 June 2012, 4 May 2013, 6 May 2014, 4 May 2015, 4 May 2016, 3 March 2017, 2 May 2018, 10 July 2019, 30 April 2020 and 20 October 2021.

ON THE SCREEN

Fribourg (Switzerland) 2022

The Prize of the Ecumenical Jury at the 36th Fribourg International Film Festival 2022, endowed with Fr. 5000 by the ecumenical campaign of Fastenopfer and HEKS/Bread for All, went to Téodora Ana Mihai for the film *La Civil* (Belgium/Romania/Mexico, 2021).

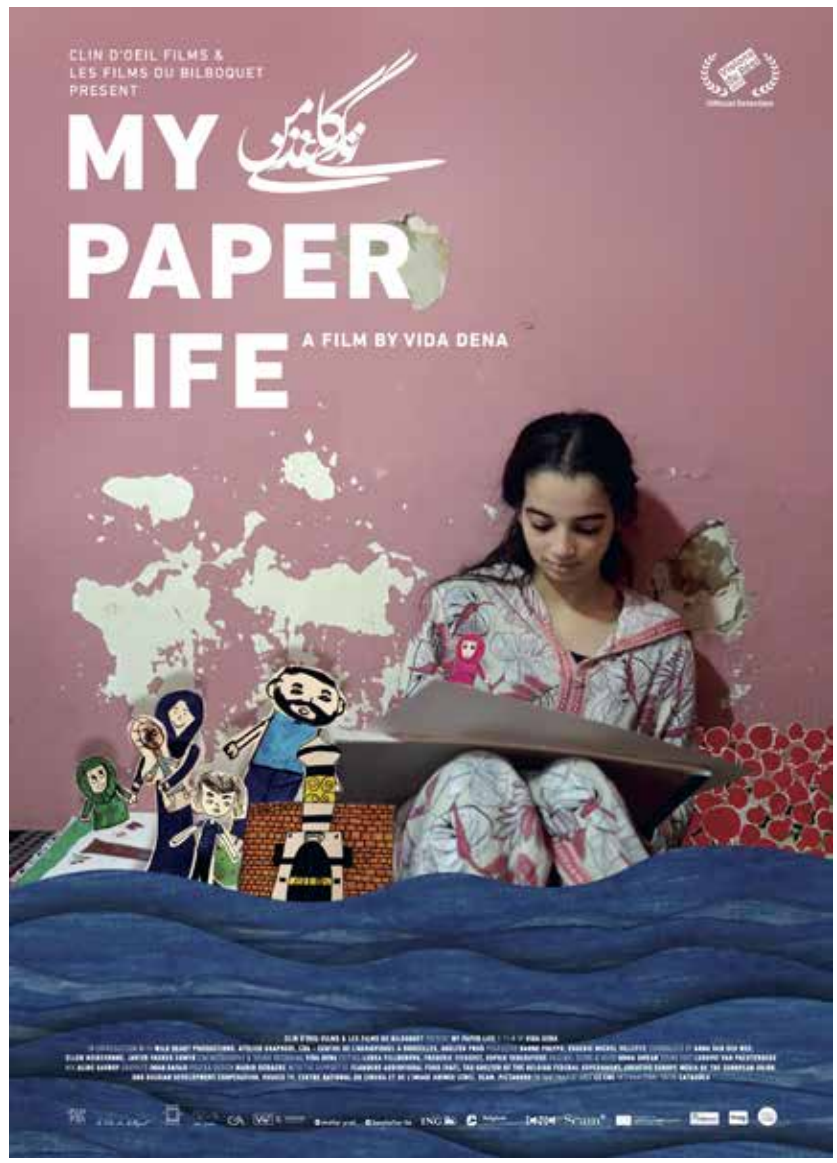
The film tells the story of Cielo - played outstandingly by Arcelia Ramírez - a mother who falls into the terrible violence of the Mexican cartels after her daughter is kidnapped. We are impressed by the courage of this woman and her phenomenal energy and determination. Around this dramatic event, she develops a powerful inner strength to persevere to the end in her search for the truth. The film is a universal plea for all those mothers who relentlessly keep their hope alive and engage in the fight for justice.

Members of the 2022 Jury: Diane Falque, Lille (France); Bernadette Meier, Uster (Switzerland) – President; Guy Rainotte (Belgium); Renata Werlen, Bern (Switzerland).

Nyon (Switzerland) 2022

An interreligious jury, appointed by INTERFILM (International Inter-Church Film Organisation) and SIGNIS (World Association for Catholic Communication) has been present at the Festival Visions du Réel in Nyon (Switzerland) since 2005. The jury includes a member of INTERFILM and SIGNIS and a member of Jewish and Muslim faith. Due to the pandemic situation, the jury this year was again composed only of members from Switzerland.

The jury makes an award to a feature-length film in the international competition consisting of 16 films, that sheds light on existential, social or spiritual questions as well as human values. The prize of CHF 5'000 is donated by the Swiss Catholic Church, the Reformed Churches in the French-speaking part Switzerland (CER) and its Media Department Média-pros, and the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities.



At the 53rd Festival Visions du Réel 7-17 April, the jury awarded its Prize to the film *My Paper Life - Ma vie en papier – Mein Leben in Papier* directed by Vida Dena (Belgium, France, Iran, 2022).

Motivation: The film offers insights into the life of a Syrian family in Belgium, characterized by the director's empathy towards her characters. Starting with drawings made by the family members, their experiences of refuge and their dreams are confronted with the realities they have to deal with. At the centre are the daughters, two young women in search of their way between tradition and modernity.

With attention and tenderness, Vida Dena shows the problems typical of refugee families: shaken identities and often difficult experiences

of integration. But they also inspire dreaming; life proves stronger than all obstacles.

The jury is proud to be able to give an award to this touching film, which – although shot almost exclusively in the family's living quarters – connects past and future, life and dream, roots and identity, and which consists to a considerable extent of drawings that are integrated in a surprising and convincing way as poetic animations.

The Interreligious Jury 2022 consisted of Ali Biçer; Noëmi Gradwohl; André Joly, Lausanne – President; Blanca Steinmann.

Oberhausen (Germany) 2022

At the 68th International Short Film Festival Oberhausen 30 April to 9 May, INTERFILM and SIGNIS appointed two Ecumenical Juries: one for the International Competition; and another one for the International Online Competition. In addition, the Jury of the International Competition award a Recommendation for a film in the Children and Youth Competition.

In the International Competition, the Ecumenical Jury awarded its Prize, endowed with € 1500.- by the Catholic Film Work and the Evangelical Church in Oberhausen, to *Odorless Blue Flowers Awake Prematurely* directed by Panos Abrahamian (Lebanon, 2021).

Motivation: If the world that was yours ends, if you cannot even smell the source of life, there isn't much left to say. This short film witnesses the future seems far away, but the hope lies in the image outside the cosmos of those who rule.

The members of the 2022 Jury were Jean-Jacques Cunnac (France); Joël Frisdo (Netherlands); Anna-Maria Kégl (Germany).

In the International Online Competition, the Ecumenical Online Jury awarded its Prize to *73* directed by Meshy Koplevitch (Israel, 2021).

Motivation: For combining depth and simplicity, compassion and vision. A film which moves from live action to free-form watercolour animation sees a young woman tell the story of her father's experience during the Yom Kippur War. Blending memory, history, and personal reflection, 73 is a powerful film about death and the life-giving resurrection which occurs through love. The film points to us the need for loving our enemies and thus reveals the reality of a shared humanity restored in the most difficult of times.

In addition, the Jury awarded a Commendation to *Blink in the Desert* directed by Shinobu Soejima (Japan, 2021).

Motivation: For the film's inclusive use of animated characters of humans, animals, and insects told through poetic visual composition and sound. With almost no dialogue, Blink in the Desert reflects on human aggression and indifference adopted to destroy what we do not know or understand and giving rise to agony on all sides. The film is an internal call for peace and progress, empathy and compassion, and the accommodation of differences.

The members of the 2022 Online Jury: Innocent Umezuruike Iroaganachi (Nigeria); Mina Radovic (United Kingdom/Serbia); Marta Romanova-Jekabsone (Latvia).

In the Children and Youth Film Competition, the Ecumenical Jury gave a Recommendation to the film *Titan* directed by Valéry Carnoy (Belgium, France, 2022).

Motivation: For its brilliant storytelling, for its powerful portrait of a 13-year-old teenager confronting the violence of a strange initiation ritual, in search of an identity. A touching and realistic chronicle on the body, and on a childhood in turmoil preserved by the unconditional love of a mother. A film that moves both teenagers and adults.

Cannes (France) 2022

The 2022 Ecumenical Jury awarded its Prize to *Broker* directed by Hirokazu Kore-Eda (South Korea). When a baby is left in front of a "baby-box" facility of a church, two men initially try to sell the baby, girls being cheaper than boys! Yet when the mother comes back a whole different story unfolds.

The film shows in an intimate way how family can be family without blood ties. Lives and souls are being protected by a secure environment created by the three adults and an orphan boy around the baby, despite the many different tormented backgrounds. The main characters are all dealing with guilt in a vulnerable way. In a touching conversation between two adults, one abandoned by parents, the other having abandoned her child, a groundbreaking way of giving "forgiveness by proxy", is screened.

Ella Kemp, reviewing the film in *Indiewire* (27 May 2022) wrote, "The execution of this premise is, somehow, miraculous in its sensitivity, asking questions about issues of ethics, of choice, of money, and murder, and family, and how to find love in all this sorry mess. No answers are given — Kore-eda is an empath but has never been a utopian, rarely one for an incredible happy ending. There's an astonishing sympathy for the unforgivable decisions we make, a patience for all the strange journeys you have to take in order to shake off the resentment passed down by generations. And, somehow, the filmmaker always finds a way to see light in it all."

The 2022 Ecum,enical Jury consisted of Waltraud Verlaguet (France), President; Mariola Marczak (Poland); Dietmar Adler (Germany); Irina-Margaret Nistor (Romania); Praxedis Bouwman (Netherlands); Monique Beguin (France).

Zlín (Czech Republic) 2022

At the 62nd International Film Festival for Children and Youth Zlín (May 25 – June 1, 2022), the Ecumenical Jury awarded its Prize in the International Competition for Feature Films in the Youth category to *Coast* directed by Jessica Hester and Derek Schweickart (USA, 2022) for its unpretentious way of telling a simple coming of age story of the 16 year-old Abby, growing up in a small Californian rural community, with a large immigrant population. A place that a rebel such as Abby has to make out in order to find herself by leaving behind her roots, mother's footsteps, family and friends issues, or even boredom. But sometimes dreams are just not big enough to leave home. A beautiful story about the brother of the prodigal son that never left town, but still made important life path choices by staying.

In addition, the Jury awarded a Commendation in the International Competition for Feature Films in the Junior Category to *Bigman* directed by Camiel Schouwenaar (Netherlands, Germany, 2022) for the inspirational drive of the 13 year-old protagonist Dylan to overcome sufferance and vulnerability after an accident and pursue happiness and fulfil his passion by any means and sacrifices. For depicting so nicely children's friendship, solidarity and wisdom above parenting shortcomings.

The members of the 2022 Jury were Barbora Cihelková, Czech Republic; Adriana Răcășan, Romania (President); Kathrin Rudolph, Germany.