

Media Development

4/2014

WACC



ALTS

- ➔ Why global Internet governance must matter to social justice activists
- ➔ Voices of icons
- ➔ Soft power and the Chinese dream (中国梦)
- ➔ Religion in plain view

Join the World Association for Christian Communication!

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

MEMBERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

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

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

Full details can be found on WACC's web site:
www.waccglobal.org

CURRENT MEMBERSHIP RATES

North America	40 USD (Personal) 120 USD (Corporate)
Rest of the World	30 USD (Personal) 100 USD (Corporate)
Student Rate	10 USD

Media Development is published quarterly by the
World Association for Christian Communication
308 Main Street
Toronto, Ontario M4C 4X7, Canada.
Tel: 416-691-1999 Fax: 416-691-1997
www.waccglobal.org

Editor: Philip Lee

Editorial Consultants

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

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

Robert A. Hackett (*Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, Canada*).

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

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

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

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

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

Clemencia Rodriguez (*Ohio University, USA*).

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

Dennis Smith (*Presbyterian Church, USA, and WACC President*).

Annabelle Sreberny (*School of Oriental and African Studies, London, United Kingdom*).

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

Subscriptions to *Media Development*

Individuals worldwide US\$40.

Libraries and institutions in North America and Europe US\$75.

Libraries and institutions elsewhere in the world US\$50.

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

Cover design: Brad Collicott

Published in Canada
ISSN 0143-5558

- 4 Editorial
- 5 “Beats, Rhymes, and Life”: Hip hop’s unlikely movement
Michael W. Waters
- 10 Rap, graffiti and social media in South Africa today
Itunu Bodunrin
- 16 Social media protest in Iran: Re-imagining the Iranian people
Samira Rajabi
- 20 God wears Tom Ford: Hip hop’s revisioning of divine authority
Anthony B. Pinn
- 24 Why global Internet governance must matter to social justice activists
Seán Ó Siochrú, Sally Burch, Bruce Girard, Michael Gurstein, Richard Hill
- 29 Voices of icons
Hans W. Florin
- 34 Soft power and the Chinese dream (中国梦)
Jan Servaes
- 39 Religion in plain view
Manuela Kalsky
- 43 On the Screen...

In the Next Issue

The 1/2015 issue of *Media Development* will look at the state of democratic communication in Burma, Cambodia and Thailand.

WACC Members and Subscribers to *Media Development* are able to download and print a complete PDF of each journal or PDFs of individual articles.



WACC is a member of the
actalliance

Graffiti and public speaking have an ancient pedigree. In classical Greece and Rome, public speaking was known as rhetoric – the composition and delivery of speeches. It was an important skill in public and private life. The Greek philosopher Aristotle and the Roman orator Quintilian practised oratory, and it was an essential part of a liberal arts education during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

The first parliament in the modern sense, from the French *parler* meaning “to talk” or “to discuss”, dates to 12th century Sicily, where representatives of the nobility, the church, and autonomous towns had decision-making powers. In the 13th century the term “parliament” was used to designate an advisory body among the French-speaking nobility in England. And from the 18th century onwards, rhetoric or “the good person speaking well” – the art of persuasion – became the basis of democratic politics, although direct election by the people lagged behind.

We can imagine that speaking in community – in the form of talking circles and discussions with elders – was the basis for tribal decision-making since the beginning of history. Similarly, expressing discontent through informal public writing or drawing must have had its counterpart in every culture. In fact, graffiti has long existed, with examples dating back to Ancient Egypt, Ancient Greece, and the Roman Empire.

Interestingly, the only known source of the Safaitic language, an Ancient North Arabian dialect, is from graffiti: inscriptions scratched on the surface of rocks and boulders in the basalt desert of southern Syria, eastern Jordan and northern Saudi Arabia. Safaitic dates from the first century BC to the fourth century AD.

A whole genre of artistic expression today is based upon spray paint graffiti styles conveying social and political messages. And within hip hop culture, graffiti has evolved alongside hip hop music and both were derided before finding an unassailable place in youth culture. Hip hop can be seen as a kind of oral graffiti that harks back to

public speaking – a kind of rhetoric of the people.

It is as forms of non-elitist media that graffiti and hip hop have put pressure on the more formal boundaries of communication. Young people, who may feel themselves and their concerns ignored by decision-makers and by traditional mass media, find creative outlets of their own and especially in what appear to be the unbounded domains of social media. Itunu Bodunrin, writing in this issue of *Media Development*, makes this clear:

“Despite the difficulties encountered in utilizing hip-hop as a protest tool in many urban cities in South Africa today, many marginalized youths in the peripheries continue to engage in rap as a means to create spaces to penetrate a public domain that often excludes them in favour of adults, while some rural communities with no access to mainstream media (radio, TV, internet etc.) also utilise graffiti to protest perceived injustice.”

In *Fissures in the Media Landscape: An international study of citizens' media* (2001), Clemencia Rodriguez makes the point that:

“Producing alternative media messages implies much more than simply challenging the mainstream media ... It implies having the opportunity to create one's own images of self and environment; it implies being able to recodify one's own identity with the signs and codes that one chooses, thereby disrupting the traditional acceptance of those imposed by outside sources.”

Hip hop and graffiti do just that. Identity is affirmed and alternative views and opinions given space. Soapbox oratory, early forms of social media like graffiti and hip hop, and later forms of mobile social media which allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content embody true freedom of expression. But what is really at stake is who is listening? And more to the point – for good or ill – who is acting on what they hear? ■

“Beats, Rhymes, and Life”: Hip hop’s unlikely movement¹

Michael W. Waters

On August 11, 1973, a party in the recreation room at 1520 Sedgwick Avenue in the South Bronx became the unlikely birthplace of a movement; hip hop. Forty years removed from its genesis, hip hop remains vibrant, influencing everything from linguistics and politics to music and fashion. To fully understand hip hop – and its historical and present-day contributions – it is important to note the context that shaped it and that ultimately catapulted it internationally.

On April 4, 1968, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. Widely regarded as the American Civil Rights Movement’s greatest leader and most prominent voice for social change, King’s death marked the end of the American Civil Rights era. King’s death also marked the beginning of the decline of the historic African American church, fuelled by a growing disillusionment with the church to effectuate still needed changes and equality for African Americans. “An earlier concern for social justice seemed lost to a new sense of individual pietism that promised heaven but did little to change the existential situation of black Americans.”²

A new generation of African American youth came of age during the years of the African American church’s decline. The children of the Baby Boomers Generation – individuals born during the Post-World War II spike in births in America between 1946 and 1964 – this new generation’s disillusionment with the African American church was fuelled not only by their parent’s disillusionment, but on account of the dire economic and social concerns surrounding them,

particularly in the urban centre. Therefore, in one generation’s time, African American participation in the life of the historic African American church declined dramatically, especially with urban African American men. “A generation ago, four out of every five inner city black men had some contact with church or Sunday School. Today... studies show three out of five have no church contact whatsoever.”³

As the historic African American church continued its decline in the 1970s, no other place in America reflected the post-civil rights era despair as the New York City Borough the South Bronx. “The Bronx, particularly its southernmost section... had a gang problem, a heroin problem, and like the other outlying boroughs, no industrial base on which to rebuild.”⁴ From the bleak despair of joblessness, violence, drugs, and burned out buildings arose a new hope, a new culture that would change the world. “Behind the decay and neglect [the Bronx] was a cauldron of vibrant, unnoticed, and quite visionary creativity born of its racial mix and its relative isolation. It was within



its boundaries that the expressions we associate with hip hop – graffiti art, break-dancing, MCing, and mixing – all have roots.”⁵

Hip hop makes an indelible mark

Hip hop is a child of the South Bronx, itself a cauldron of many cultural expressions. “At its most elemental level hip hop is a product of post-civil rights era America, a set of cultural forms originally nurtured by African-American, Caribbean-American, and Latin American youth in and around New York in the 70’s.”⁶

For years, mainstream culture considered hip hop to be a passing youth fad. Yet, “Hip hop has outlived all its detractors and even surprised most ardent early supporters by always changing, and with each change, expanding its audience. It has outgunned punk, post-punk, New Wave, Rave, House, techno, and every other much-hyped musical form of the age.”⁷

Much of hip hop’s staying power can be attributed to its essential voice for a generation in peril. “Hip hop...chronicles a generation coming of age at a moment of extreme racial confusion

– in these years since official apartheid was legislated out of existence and de facto segregation grew – who have been grappling with what equality means during the worst economic conditions for the underclass since the Depression. Hip Hop is...a product of a schizophrenic, post-civil rights movement America.”⁸

Hip hop has made its mark, remaining an indelible part, not just American culture, but of global culture as well. It can no longer be regulated as an urban American subculture. “Hip hop...as a whole, has utterly broken through from its ghetto roots to assert a lasting influence on...clothing, magazine publishing, television, language, sexuality, and social policy as well as its obvious presence in records and movies.”⁹

Hip hop has been defined in a multiplicity of ways, still several key elements provide for a clearer definition of what hip hop is. “Most participants and observers identify five key elements to hip hop: Djing, MCing, dancing (break and step), graffiti, and cultural style (ranging from clothing and hairstyle to magazines and literature). A sixth can be identified as ‘beat-boxing’, a form of expression in which a sole performer uses voice and body to make the sounds of scratching (as if on a vinyl record), drums, even stereo sounds and music.”¹⁰

Legendary hip hop artist Kurtis Blow adds a seventh key element of hip hop; love and understanding or personal spirituality. Hip hop in this regard is about “the way you live your life, the ‘way you live your Hip Hop!’”¹¹

Out of a context of despair, hip hop emerged as a beacon of hope giving voice to communities at the margins and illuminating the challenges experienced by urban youth too often ignored. The rapper, or MC, emerged as the primary voice and storyteller in hip hop. Their lyrics created a canon for the culture. In the tradition of the Old Testament prophets, many rappers give vivid depictions of the struggles of daily life. Rappers have emerged as prophets, offering laments on behalf of their communities, and giving voice to the pain and suffering of a generation.

Given its historical context, unlike other primarily African American cultural forms, hip

hop does not find its origins within the historic African American church, but upon the hardened streets of urban America. Hence, hip hop's spirituality is not directly informed by the Christian African American religious experience, such that "the pulpit lost influence with young blacks and was replaced by street commentator voices... [that] fuelled the rise of hip-hop culture – rappers...who today have greater influence over black youth than preachers do."¹²

As with all movements, hip hop has experienced critical challenges. Concerning certain subcultures within hip hop, these challenges have included the glorification of misogyny, violence, drug use, and materialism. Certain subcultures of hip hop are particularly disturbing related to the objectification of women, "rap songs referring to Black women as bitches, gold diggers, hos, hood-rats, chickenheads, pigeons, and so on...with rump shaking, scantily clad young Black women as stage props for rap artists."¹³ This is problematic in that it denies Black women their authentic identity as being created in the image of God. Yet, these ills are not merely reflective of hip hop alone, but of American culture at large.

In the face of these notable challenges, hip hop can be credited with several achievements emergent from its hope-filled origins. A transcendent culture, "[The] American Anthropological Association...agreed that burgeoning hip hop communities existed in Japan, Europe, South Africa, and South America."¹⁴ Neither culture, ethnicity, class, language, nor religion serves as a hindrance to the transmission of the culture. Hip hop forms authentic community within societies, making people feel as though they, and what they have experienced, matters. "Hip-hop brings the hope back. Even if it offers no change, it at least gives confirmation that your situation is recognized and identified."¹⁵

Hip hop creates a sense of belonging

Hip hop offers a place of belonging where people are welcomed and encouraged to be their authentic selves. "Being connected means that you count... Hip-hop does that – it creates within itself a vibe where people can count and thus belong."¹⁶ This

need for a place of belonging is a universal need, shared amongst the human family. This sense of belonging cannot be underestimated, especially when giving consideration to the needs of people living at the margins of society. "When belonging is a prevailing need, you will find a place or even create a place where you belong. Thus hip hop culture."¹⁷

Creating and nurturing diversity is an achievement of hip hop. "The hip hop generation is not a monolithic group. Hip hop is diverse."¹⁸ The diversity offers great hope for the future of the world community. "Hip-hop attracts a holistic diversity, as it infuses all socioeconomic groups and puts them on equal ground... hip-hop brings together people from all walks of life."¹⁹

My church, the five year-old Joy Tabernacle African Methodist Episcopal Church in Dallas, Texas, is the fastest-growing A.M.E. Church in the State. We identify ourselves as a church that takes theological reflection and dialogue with contemporary culture seriously as a means of being transformed and of being made more relevant to the end of effectively forming community with post-civil rights era generations. Our church is a part of the historic African American church, and we recognize several truths related to this association:

"The [historic African American] church has been the most enduring organic institution created by Africans on the soil of North America. The church has nurtured our freedom movements and been the birthplace of our greatest cultural creations: the spirituals, jazz, blues, gospel, R&B, and neo-soul. All have a connection to the faith community we call church. The one cultural creation not tied directly to the church is the newest child in African American culture: hip hop."²⁰

Given the fact that newer generations of African Americans have come of age largely outside of the context and nurture of the historic African American church, we believe that Joy Tabernacle can more effectively form community with these

generations of African American through our faithful engagement with hip hop. As such, our worship experience has such added dimensions as a DJ who plays tracks and scratches during worship and, on occasion, hip hop artists who rap or deliver spoken word during our services. I regularly preach sermon series that engage the hip hop lyrical canon as a theological conversation partner.

On countless occasions, members and visitors have approached me following our services to say they had not felt welcomed or at home in church in a long time, and that they had absented themselves from worship for many years. However, my sermon affirmed for them that there was a place for them to belong in the church, and that they felt that Joy Tabernacle took them and their unique life experiences seriously. "Hip Hop explores a basic theology of life,"²¹ and in doing, welcomes everyone to the table.

From its humble beginnings in the South Bronx to the international stage, and now, even into sacred spaces, hip hop continues to evolve. May we never lose sight of hip hop's hope-filled origins, or of its benefits to forming and supporting diverse communities.

And may we always endeavour to listen to hip hop's voices from the margins, and then faithfully counter the systems that keep them there! ■

The posters on pages 5, 6 and 8 were created by Sir Adrian Jones of CEO of Sir Jones Productions, LLC.

Notes

1. *Beats, Rhymes, and Life* is the title of seminal hip hop group A Tribe Called Quest's fourth album released July 30, 1996.
2. Anthony B. Pinn, *The Black Church in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 18-19.
3. Pinn, 20.
4. Nelson George, *Hip Hop America* (New York: Penguin Group, 1998), 10.
5. George, 10.
6. George, viii.
7. George, x-xi.
8. George, xiii-xiv.
9. George, ix.
10. Timothy Holder, "Introduction" in *The Hip Hop Prayer Book with Holy Bible Stories* (New York: Church Publishing), xiv-xv.
11. Holder, xv.
12. Efrem Smith and Phil Jackson, *The Hip Hop Church: Connecting with the Movement Shaping Our Culture* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 2005), 170.



13. Bakari Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture* (Basic Books: New York, 2002), 87.
14. Jamal-Harrison Bryant, "Holla if Ya Hear Me: The Hip Hop Pastor As Peer," in *The Hip Hop Pastor as Countercultural Model Professional*, in Ralph C. Watkins, *The Gospel Remix: Reaching the Hip Hop Generation* (Valley Forge: Judson Press), 89.
15. Smith and Jackson, 68.
16. Smith and Jackson, 73.
17. Smith and Jackson, 83.
18. William H. Curtis, "Bad Boy for Life from Puffy to Diddy: The Hip Hop Pastor as Countercultural Model Professional," in Ralph C. Watkins, *The Gospel Remix: Reaching the Hip Hop Generation* (Valley Forge: Judson Press), 99.
19. Smith and Jackson, 90-91.
20. Benjamin Stephens III and Ralph Watkins, *From Jay-Z to Jesus: Reaching and Teaching Young Adults in the Black Church* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2009), vii.
21. Daniel White Hodge, *The Soul of Hip Hop: Rims, Timbs, and A Cultural Theology* (Downers Grove, Illinois, IVP Books, 2010), 23.

Michael W. Waters is founding pastor of Joy Tabernacle African Methodist Episcopal Church in Dallas, Texas, one of the newest and fastest-growing A.M.E. churches in the state. As pastor, preacher, professor, author, motivational speaker, and community organizer, Waters' words of hope and empowerment have inspired national and international audiences. Based on his blogs for the Huffington Post, he published the book *FREESYLE* in February 2014. In his book Michael Waters speaks about relevant current events out of the perspective of a member of the hip-hop generation.

FREESTYLE

Reflections of Faith, Family, Justice, and Pop Culture

Michael W. Waters

Rev. Dr. Michael Waters identifies as a member of the hip-hop generation living in an urban context. His purpose in writing is to inspire "hope in the promise of a new day, in the assurance of victory over defeat, and in the fulfillment of God's promises within the created order." *Freestyle* boldly confronts issues within the urban community such as addiction, education, incarceration, family issues, and absentee fathers. Based on his blogs from *The Huffington Post*, Waters speaks truth to relevant current events with his edgy but truthful perspectives.

SAMPLE CHAPTERS INCLUDE

Glory: A New Day for Family and Fatherhood in Hip-Hop Culture, With Deepest Regret: A Letter to the Ancestors, An Odd Future for Faith in Hip-Hop, The Liturgy of Trayvon Martin, They Reminisce Over You (T.R.O.Y.).

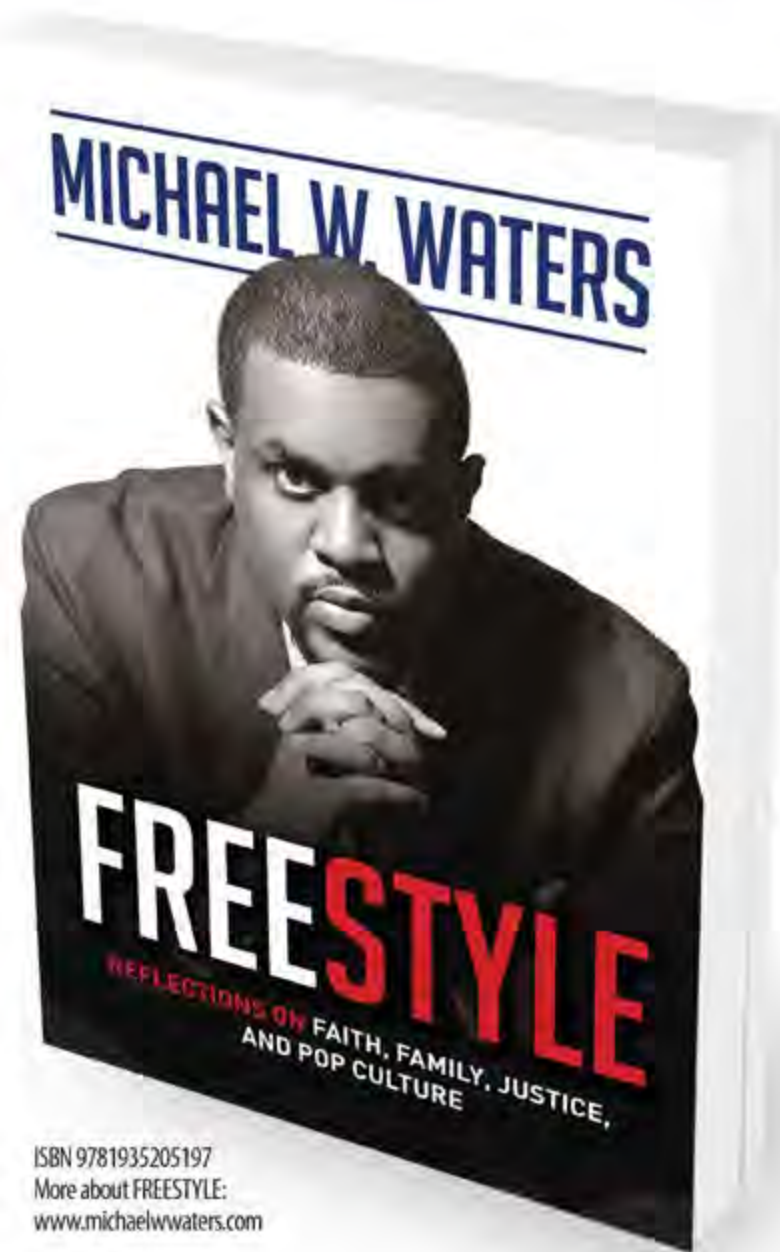
The Reverend Dr. Michael W. Waters is the founder and senior pastor of Joy Tabernacle African Methodist Episcopal Church in Dallas, Texas. He has been featured in *EBONY* magazine as an emergent leader, highlighted by the Associated Press, and engaged on *NBC Nightly News*, *The British Broadcasting Corporation's Newshour*, and National Public Radio. He is also a regular blogger for *The Huffington Post* <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-w-waters/>.

"In this book we do not hear from a detached spectator but from one who is passionately involved in the confrontation and who points the way forward with a word of hope and reconciliation."

Zan W. Holmes Jr, Pastor Emeritus,
St. Luke Community United Methodist Church, Dallas, TX

"Provocative and prophetic, Michael Waters provides a fresh perspective on issues that impact our communities, families, and the future of our country. Through his political critique, you hear the voice of a street prophet. Through his analysis of hip-hop, you hear the voice of a cultural connoisseur. Through his reflections as a father, you hear the voice of a loving parent. *FREESTYLE* is inspiring, convicting, educating—and in the end, uplifting."

Romal Tune, Author, *God's Graffiti, Inspiring Stories for Teens*



ISBN 9781935205197
More about FREESTYLE:
www.michaelwwaters.com



Rap, graffiti and social media in South Africa today

Itunu Bodunrin

Hip-hop in South Africa has been on a roller coaster ride since its emergence as a protest tool among non-white youths against apartheid in the early 1980s. Although the collapse of apartheid in the early 1990s opened up an era of commercialisation which ultimately suppressed its “protest” feature, it has again resurfaced reflecting the social hills of the post-apartheid era, such as class struggles and imbalances, corruption, HIV, violence, racism and poverty.

The music culture of hip-hop began among the African American community in the Bronx, United States in the mid-1970s as a form of youth resistance against racial oppression. It incorporates elements such as rapping (oral), graffiti (visual), Dj-ing (aural) and break-dancing (physical). The graffiti element became synonymous with hip-hop in the early 1980s, when hip-hop gangs and street kids in the United States went around the neighborhood with spray cans tagging and scribbling their gang names on city walls.

But graffiti existed long before hip-hop began in many parts of the world. For instance, the Chinese communist leader Mao Zedong was said to have used graffiti in the 1920s, for his slogans and paintings during his revolution (Morwe, 2010). In the same vein, graffiti preceded hip-hop in South Africa, where it was labelled “protest” or “resistant art”. Both were triggered by the need for resistance against the apartheid regimes (see Williamson, 2004).



Hip-hop culture began as rap in the Cape Flats¹ near the city of Cape Town as an underground movement in the early 1980s, when government repression and the banning of protesting organizations and individuals meant that people had to find new ways to express their grievances. The marginalized youth population at this time began by adapting the lyrics of the US hip-hop group, “The Public Enemy”, transforming their songs such as “Fight the Power” as a special re-

United States, the agenda of the graffiti artists of South Africa was to communicate messages using the walls of the city as galleries and notice boards (Williamson, 2004). A classic example of this is the *free Mandela* graffiti on many public walls in the late 1980s.

Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu (2004) concludes that from the 1960s to early 1990s, hip-hop and in particular graffiti were used to transcend the youth’s horrendous experience



silience to fight their own revolution (Battersby, 2003).

Graffiti had long begun as a separate entity from hip-hop, with many singling out the Sharpeville Massacre of 21 March 1960 and the Soweto Uprising of 16 June 1976 as the main events that triggered a series of protests, protest art and the use of graffiti. In both events, the government’s attempts to constrain a peaceful protest through the use of police force led to sporadic shooting and killing scores of innocent defenseless Blacks (see Olzak and Olivier, 1998).

By the 1980s, following the arrest of many nationalist leaders, Cape Town in particular had become famous for trenchant art and subversive comments which appeared in virtually every public space in the city. Unlike the spraycan kids in the

and circumstance into an expressive form of art against the hostile apartheid forces that demean and dehumanize them. It became a radical and an alternative medium that challenged the status quo in the absence of the government-controlled mainstream media. The marginalized youths engaged in it to create and set their own rules and values to achieve success outside the white ruling class socially prescribed norms (See also Copland, 1985; Everatt et al., 1992; Nixon, 1994; Rosenberg, 2002).

Many post-apartheid writings have extensively focused on the crucial roles graffiti and hip-hop played in these years of struggle for liberation, however, very few little has been written on the present forms of these radical media forms in post-apartheid South Africa.



Complexity of today's hip-hop

The third page of the 3 September 2014 edition of the *Daily News* newspaper had the caption: "K.O Punch to SA Hip Hop of Old." An entire page was exclusively dedicated to hip-hop's rave of the moment, Ntokozo Mdluli popularly known as "K.O", whose hip-hop rap single *Caracara* had received over a million views on YouTube, eclipsing previous hip-hop songs and set to be voted the song of the year.

K.O boasted that his emergence into the SA hip-hop scene has perpetually led to the demise of the older kinds of hip-hop – protest deviant hip-hop and other forms such as *Kwaito* that surfaced in the wake of democracy in 1994. The song *Caracara* utilises street language, slang and beats to tell stories of old school partying patterns in most urban black townships.

Hip-hop has indeed undergone some sort of a rebirth since the emergence of Nelson Mandela as the first democratically elected president in April 1994. The freedom of expression that came with democracy meant a commercialisation of musical forms and cultures, and hip-hop was not left out.

The same culture that was embedded in conflict, acted through resistance and evasion, and rooted in a conflictual ideology by youth to develop a critical common voice during apartheid, has in recent years evolved into a less defiant, aesthetic and popular urban youth culture of all races. For instance, it is not uncommon to see white

kids engaging in hip-hop and graffiti in many cities. By transcending the racial barrier, Jane Battersby (2003) concludes that hip-hop can be seen as a post-colonial (apartheid) text which reflects the new identities of South Africa's racial groups and communities.

The commodification and popularity of hip-hop in SA also means it is now backed by big organizations, government and NGOs to pursue their own agenda. For instance, rap is mainly sponsored by alcohol companies, while Coca-Cola has through its countrywide "Sprite Uncontain-

able" organised competitions among graffiti artists in the country. The government and NGOs have pounced on the popularity and sentiments attached to graffiti to promote tourism as well as to foster public awareness campaigns.

It is not uncommon to find graffiti commissioned by the government and NGOs which supports awareness campaigns of social-cultural, political and public health issues such as HIV/AIDS, political apathy etc.

Such collaborations have helped to alleviate the negative perceptions attached to hip-hop since the apartheid years. Organisations such as the Grayscale Gallery have gone a step further by hosting SA's most celebrated graffiti artists. In an effort to try and change negative perceptions around graffiti, the organisation showcases significant roles played by graffiti in cities around the world (see <http://www.jhblive.com/reviews/51056>).

Graffiti as vandalism

In spite of these many efforts aimed at giving hip-hop a positive outlook, the defiant act of scribbling trenchant and sometimes insignificant paintings on public walls persists. This has been interpreted as public nuisance and vandalization of properties, particularly by city councils who spend fortunes removing them. A Cape Town spokesperson, for instance, laments that "... graffiti is no longer what it used to be" (cited from Williamson, 2004). It is assumed that graffiti artists misuse their unlimited

expression of freedom by indecently painting public walls for no known cause.

Thus the Cape Town city council in 2010 moved to enact a Graffiti By-law which makes graffiti an illegal act, punishable by lengthy jail terms. This sparked a lot of controversy over the role of graffiti in communities particularly in Cape Town where graffiti has been part and parcel of the city's history. It is even thought to be one of the reasons why it was nominated the best tourist destination in 2013 and the World Design Capital of 2014.

Activist Iliana Foutsitzis believes that banning graffiti in the city is tantamount to suppressing the voice of the poor in a democratic South Africa, because graffiti is the natural channel through which the underprivileged leave their names, impressions and a sense of creativity in society. Though associated with poverty, crews and drugs, Foutsitzis believes it should be unbanned because it is born out of creative minds and offers a splash of colour and boldness, a piece of self-prescribed integrity and pride of ownership which community members easily relate to.

This is comparable to protest rap, which has

also reared its head in recent times, but continues to be suppressed by the powers that be. Ngoan'a Nts'oana (2014) reveals that many hip-hop rap artists who use their music to critique social issues encountered mostly by working class South Africans today (such as unemployment, poverty, etc.), often face rejection from commercial radio stations and corporate sponsors who deem it unfit for their agenda.

Although many of such artists have used the social media platform such as YouTube to distribute their music, they nevertheless struggle to get attention and the commercial success of mainstream artists. This reiterates the importance of the mainstream media in the commercialisation of music cultures in developing countries such as South Africa, where the majority of the population are in the rural suburbs with limited access to the internet and social media (see www.stassa.gov.za).

Social media and the culture protest

The recently called-off protest/strike by the platinum mine workers that lasted for more than five months and severely affected the nation's



economy, has only reiterated the power of protest and who gets to speak and who gets to listen in post-apartheid South African politics. This is just one of the many service delivery protests that has characterised post-apartheid South Africa, as protest remains the traditional way of registering grievances.

Youth as the most vibrant population group are not left out in many of these protests. For instance, the University of KwaZulu-Natal (the writer's institution) has perennially dealt with student protest. The most recent one caused the university to halt its academic activities for about a week in September, 2014 due to a "rumored" fee increment in the oncoming section.

The cyberspace of social media is used to organise many of these protests. According to one of the Student Union executives in charge of mobilizing protests in the University of KwaZulu-Natal, the protests were organised using platforms such as Facebook and Blackberry. "We prefer to protest by marching and dancing round the university campus for instantaneous response from the school authority," he says.

Hip-hop is a good example of radical, alternative media, which challenge the status quo. While some believe that social media compliment protest efforts (as seen in instances such as the Arab-spring), others believe social media are in fact the new hip-hop because they have replaced hip-hop as the main protest tool (see Simmons, 2010).

Despite the difficulties encountered in utilizing hip-hop as a protest tool in many urban cities in South Africa today, many marginalized youths in the peripheries continue to engage in rap as a means to create spaces to penetrate a public domain that often excludes them in favour of adults, while some rural communities with no access to mainstream media (radio, TV, internet etc.) also utilise graffiti to protest perceived injustice. Two significant cases are discussed below.

The Orange Farm Crisis

Orange Farm is a township located a few kilometres outside Johannesburg, South Africa. It is an informal settlement whose original inhabitants were laid off farm workers who took up residency

in 1988. The settlement now includes modern amenities such as a library, a few paved roads, permanent housing for some, electricity in places, a clinic, an information centre with internet access, a multi-purpose community center and franchise supermarkets.

However, these improvements came with financial costs, which few citizens living in Orange Farm could not afford. Most notably the installment of pre-paid water meters denied much of the population of Orange Farm access to clean drinking water.

Residents therefore used graffiti to subvert the water and electricity privatization initiatives, by spraying various slogans in and around the area. The graffiti on the walls of Orange Farm articulate the requests of the people not to have pre-paid water meters – "Break The Meter – Enjoy the Water!", as an alternative call for "Free Water for All!" and in protest against electricity cutoffs. In this case graffiti is seen as a medium used by communities to voice out and express their frustrations and dissent (see Morwe, 2010).

The Khwe Bushmen youth's use of rap

The Khwe Bushmen were hunter-gatherers originally from Namibia and Angola. They were wrenched from their homes in the 1960s during the border war and engaged by the South African Defence Force (SADF) in their fight against the nationalist movements in Namibia.

After the war, they were moved to South Africa, granted citizenship and resettled in a place called Platfontein in the outskirts of the city of Kimberley, Northern Cape Province. Due to their limited experience of living in a modern environment, the Khwe elderly struggle badly in their encounter with modernity and in the face of unemployment and perceived government neglect, the Khwe youths who seemed to have embraced modernity better utilised hip-hop rap as a way of voicing themselves as a people fully present in modern society. They use rap to reflect the socio-cultural and economic reality of the present struggles (see, Robbins, 2004; Bodunrin upcoming).

In this way, hip-hop in South Africa remains

a powerful tool of protest in the hands of marginalized groups, particularly those in townships with limited access to the mainstream media, while the increasing popularity of social media in the country may potentially bring back the old protest hip-hop culture among urban youth. ■

Photo credits: Page 10 A graffiti depicting the famous killing of Hector Pieterse during the Soweto uprising in 1976. Page 11 Graffiti in a rural part of Cape Town by Faith47 - a famous graffiti artist who grew up during the Apartheid regime. Faith47 said "I wanted to highlight the inequalities, and install the feeling that it hasn't happened yet – people are quite aware that they are not all sharing in the country's wealth." Page 12 Graffiti used as protest tool during the Orange Farm Crisis protest (Morwe, 2010). Page 13 Hip-hop rap of old remains an important protest tool among immigrant Bushmen youth. Picture taken in a Do It Yourself (DIY) Bedroom studio by Thom Pierce (June, 2014).

Note

1. The Cape flats were apartheid designated rural settlements for non-whites. It has since been home to majority of the population of greater Cape Town (http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cape_Flats).

References

- Battersby, J. (2003) Sometimes it feels like I'm not Black enough: Recast(e)ing Coloured through South African Hip-hop as a Postcolonial Text. In H. Wasserman and S. Jacobs (Eds.) *Shifting Selves: Post-Apartheid Essays on Mass Media, Culture and Society*, pp 109-129.
- Ben Morten (2014) *South Africa: Hollow ANC Victory: Class struggle ahead*. <http://www.marxist.com/hollow-anc-victory-class-struggle-ahead.htm>. Accessed on 19 September, 2014.
- Bodunrin, I. (Forthcoming) *The Emergence of Hip-hop Culture among Khwe Youth Subculture*. Masters Research Dissertation, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa.
- Copland, D. B. (1985) *Township Tonight! South Africa's Black City Music and Theatre*. London: Longman.
- Downing, J. (2001) *Radical media: rebellious communication and social movements*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Everatt, D & Sisulu, F. (1992). *Black Youths in Crisis: Facing the Future*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- Iliana Foutsitzis. *Cape Town Graffiti Art Unfiltered by the Mainstream*. www.capechameleon.co.za/printed-issue/issue-4/art-and-culture. Accessed on 19 September, 2014.
- Kgalalelo Morwe (2010) *Don't mess with my graffiti, sweetie!* <http://www.expressimpress.org/2010/09/21/dont-mess-with-my-graffiti/> Accessed on 29 August, 2014.
- Ngoan'a Nts'oana (2014) *The Rules of South African Hip-hop in 2014*. <http://africasacountry.com/south-africa-hip-hop-in-2014/> Accessed on 6th June, 2014.
- Nixon, R. (1994) *Homelands, Harlem and Hollywood: South African Culture and the World beyond*. New York: Routledge.
- Olzak, S. and Olivier, J. L. (1998) *Racial Conflict and Protest*

- in South Africa and the United States, *European Sociological Review*, Vol. 14, No. 3, pp. 255-278
- Robbins, D. (2004) *A San Journey: The story of the !Xun and Khwe of Platfontein*, The Sol
- Plaaitje Educational Trust, Kimberley, South Africa.
- Rosenberg, S. (2002) Youths Popular Culture and Identity: American influences on South Africa and Lesotho, *The Journal of South African and American Comparative Studies*, 9.
- Russell Simmons, R. (2010) *Social Media Is the New Hip-Hop*. Accessed on 6 June, 2014.
- Tutu, D. (2004 edition) Foreword In *Resistant Art in South Africa*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Williamson, S. (2004 edition) *Resistant Art in South Africa*. Cape Town: David Philip.

Itunu Bodunrin is currently completing his Masters dissertation at the Centre for Communication, Media and Society at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa. His research interest lies in the Southern Kalahari Desert where he is investigating the emerging post-modern cultural patterns among Bushmen youths.

Recent Issues of Media Development

3/2014 Communication among the Pacific Islands

2/2014 Indigenous media and digital self-determination

1/2014 The Family in the Information Age

Media Development is provided free to Personal and Corporate Members of WACC and is also available by subscription.

For more information visit:
<http://waccglobal.org/>

Social media protest in Iran: Re-imagining the Iranian people

Samira Rajabi

Not long ago, few media consumers could truly name a time in which they witnessed a real death in the media. Of course, with mass media proliferation, most of the developed world has been exposed to some degree of reporting on war, conflict or political unrest in the evening news, on the cover of the international section of a newspaper, or in a news magazine. There are those iconic images that have historically allowed media users to visualize contexts of protest in the imaginative space of the mind, though the context of those protests might be quite far from their realm of understanding.

Recent technological changes and global events have shifted daily interaction with those spaces of protest, making them more personal, more intimate, and in many ways more memorable. Few people who witnessed the 2009 murder of Neda Agha-Soltan will soon forget what they saw. The image of her blood stained face and her captive eyes was graphic, visceral and moving. People saw her lying on the ground, dying as they helplessly watched. These witnesses were not the spectators in the street, or the men who frantically tried to save her. They were the YouTube audiences that clicked through social media posts to a powerful video of a woman, Neda, dying in the street.

Neda Agha-Soltan was one of thousands of protestors in the 2009 Iranian uprising that came about in response to the contested presiden-

tial election between Mir Houssein Mousavi and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. What became known as the Green Movement was a large scale uprising against an arguably unjust president and a hard-line regime. Peaceful protestors, who made careful references to Islam, in order to avoid condemnation from the government, were met with unexpected force and violence (Varzi, 2011). Neda was killed during these protests by the Iranian plainclothes police.

Neda's image online, in the midst of this political unrest, functioned as a pivotal moment in the movement because of an Iranian doctor and author walking behind her who tried in vain to save her while his friend videotaped the scene. That video captured hearts and minds while highlighting a unique way that the Internet takes up an image: making it and remaking it according to the logic of protestors. The video of Neda serves as a vivid symbol of the aching heart of a nation and all those bearing witness to its pain.

The video was a call to action, one that publics globally responded to. The original video of her death was seen over a million-and-a-half times (FEELTHELIGHT, 2009). That image was then re-made and re-mediated through YouTube tributes to her life, her beauty, her sacrifice, and her death. As the Iranian regime cracked down on physical forms of resistance, people moved to online spaces to express their grief, sorrow, and more importantly to protest not just the woeful fate of Neda, but of their entire country.

Stories of grief, stories of struggle, and expressions of hope

Immediately Neda's image was invoked as an angel, a symbol, an icon. The word "neda" means voice, and the protestors made her their voice. Her face, blood stained and dying, became a powerful



marker of the opposition. Just two days after her murder it was noted in *The New York Times* that, “the very public adulation of Ms. Agha-Soltan could create a religious symbol for the opposition and sap support for the government among the faithful who believe Islam abhors killing innocent civilians” (Fathi, 2009).

Within days tributes multiplied on YouTube from all sides of the world. Some were sanctioned by international advocacy agencies such as Amnesty International, while others displayed disparate diaspora communities striving desperately to show solidarity with Iranian protestors. In all of these videos we see the tools of social media being brought to bear on something more vital than a meme or the requisite cat video. These were stories of grief, stories of struggle, and expressions of hope for freedom through democracy.

Despite mainstream representations, Neda was not an innocent bystander; she was an educated protestor seeking change in her country (Kamalipour, 2010). However, with constant re-mediations of her image the truth of who Neda was became less important than who YouTube tribute makers believed her to be, and, perhaps more aptly, wanted her to be for them. Using tropes of gender and religion, protestors mobilized witnesses inside and outside of Iran through emotional appeals. Her beauty and gender turned her into a female martyr who reminded YouTube users of Mother Mary (Kamalipour ed., 2010).

There was a sense of hope in her death. Just as the Guadalupe was important to Mexico, Neda is important to Iran “not only because she is a supernatural mother, but also because she embodies their major political and religious aspirations” (Wolf, 1958). These devotional acts made clear that Neda was a complex and nuanced symbol of the collective history of a nation that has long been at the centre of international political

and cultural discussion.

Critics note that, while Neda is a powerful figure, her death, and, indeed, the Green Movement, did not substantially shift the political and religious dynamics in Iran that caused these uprisings in the first place. While it is true that there has been no systemic overthrow in Iran we can see shifts in the mediations of Iran and the narratives coming out of Iran. In 2012, a public execution was posted online by YouTube user “iran parast”. The graphic video has over 2.7 million views and ends with a plea to those living in “free countries” to use that power to help the people of Iran.

It is not difficult to argue that the image of Neda, the resonance that it left online and among Iranian publics, made videos of such graphic injustices seem more allowable. This is, of course, not



the work of the Internet and social media alone. We’ve seen progressive change arise as a result of multiple small scale resistances in everyday life. For example, graffiti in the streets of Iran has been studied as having a liberating effect on citizens.

Further, the ideological conflict has long been fought on women’s bodies, their lipstick becoming brighter and hejab being moved further back on their heads as forms of micro-resistance against a brutal regime. Each transgression provides space for further transgressions. Each act of micro-resistance leaves traces of itself thus cultivating a longitudinal protest that is almost imper-

ceptible in its articulations. Particularly interesting in the case of Iran is the way Iranian people seek to shirk the stories that are told in the dominant international and western media narratives about their country.

Making the invisible visible

Only certain kinds of images are acceptable in the cross-cultural exchange of ideas that so often intersects with understandings of race, ethnicity, religion, and gender. Neda made sense as a public icon: her image was largely Western, her beauty fit into conventions and standards recognized on a global scale. She was a likeable victim in that she fit a prevailing image of innocence, fragility, and attractiveness.

Despite this, online re-mediators of her image used her to retell a story of Iran, and to use her as an entry point to make marked, invisible Iranian bodies visible on a global scale. Suddenly, even othered bodies were made legible as suffering: dark bodies, bearded bodies, veiled bodies, conventional and unconventional bodies all suddenly had a space from which to speak.

Recently *The New York Times* featured an article about Iranian artist Newsha Tavakolian who gave up a 50,000 Euro photojournalism prize to cover what had been termed “the burnt generation” (Gonzalez, 2014). Tavakolian took umbrage to the notion that images of everyday Iranians need to be “sexy to outsiders” and gave back the prize when she was asked to reframe her images to fit the vision of what Iran should look like according to the foundation who funded the prize (ibid, 2014).

Tavakolian’s images are subtle and powerful, eerily depicting the contested, and complex realities of Iranian daily lives. The images with their captions deliver a testimony of Iranian people attempting to be seen on their own terms – terms Neda helped make clear. Tavakolian took to Facebook to defend her photos and her decision to step away from the prize and the central, pervasive, but often false image of Iranian reality.

She stated that the foundation’s “insistence on changing essential aspects of [her] work would have resulted in completely changing the nature of

[her] project from a subtle attempt to bring across the realities of life of [her] generation in Iran to a coarse and horrible clichéd view about Iran” (Tavakolian, 2014). The possibility of this resistance can be seen as an extension of the protests and tributes that erupted on YouTube in 2009.

The images of Neda’s death were spectacular and gruesome and the same can be said of the public hangings and other images of graphic violence that have been given life through social media. Though these images may serve to fuel the prevailing narratives of Iran as nothing more than an unjust regime, they do other work as well. These articulations online provided a baseline from which to re-tell the stories, re-shape the narratives according to a grassroots logic of the people, and shift understandings of collective memory and thus future events.

The images provided a space through which to say, this is our Iran, this is our voice. Couldry (2010) argues that voice, or “giving an account of oneself and what affects one’s life” is a central part of what it means to be human and the effective opportunity to have one’s voice heard and taken into account is a human good (p. vi). Central to having a voice is the recognition of that voice. Social media is a space in which voice can be recognized and thus articulated.

In pushing back against powerful depictions of Iran, Tavakolian leaves important residues behind, similar to YouTube storytellers online who re-mediated the story of Neda to fuel their protests, and women in the streets of Iran that use their faces as a canvas through which to fight a political battle. Expressions of unique narratives online in social media provide a framework through which voice can expand, grow, and resist.

In order to actualize these voices Internet users make careful use of modern social media technologies. These moments of protest, while perhaps slowly eating away at dominant structures, serve less to change the totality of political, social, and religious environments than to facilitate changing forms of practice. Banet-Weiser (2012) argues that this technology of the self is the set of practices that permits “individuals to effect ...a certain number of operations on their own bod-

ies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (Foucault in Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 55).

When examining these spaces of small-scale dissent, we bear witness to instances of “bottom-up resistance” where those who feel disenfranchised in some way attempt to regain control and interrupt dominant ideas of identity, nationhood, mourning, violence, gender, martyrdom or any other cultural construct that functions normatively (Raley, 2009, p. 2). Raley calls these *tactical users*, who use the media to foster micro-political action



that, while fleeting, operates productively in its instability. Instability, after all, opens up space in culture for contestation. Such movements seek small scale awareness and temporary disturbances of cultural norms, functioning through destructive creativity that is ambivalent and spontaneous.

It is in these moments of resistance to the Iranian narrative that we can see the true Iranian imaginary emerge. What is unique about social media protest for these publics is not the ways of articulating meaning. Instead, it is the instantaneity combined with the traces it leaves behind, like faded graffiti woven into a new piece of art.

Without the YouTube video of Neda and the way it was taken up by the public, the current mediations of public hangings online wouldn't be possible, micro-political gestures could not take hold in the way we see them online and in the

media. Even mainstream movies like Jon Stewart's *Rosewater* could not appropriately enter into the mainstream imagination. Users want to hear the stories of Iranians because of a fateful connection with one Iranian woman on YouTube in the middle of the Green Movement. ■

References

- FEELTHE LIGHT (2009). "Wounded Girl dying in front of camera, her name was Neda." YouTube.com
- Banet-Weiser, S. (2012). *Authentic TM: The Politics and Ambivalence in a Brand Culture*. New York, NY, NYU Press.
- Couldry, N. (2010). *Why voice matters: Culture and politics after neoliberalism*. Sage Publications.
- Fathi, N. (2009). In a Death Seen Around the world, a symbol of Iranian protests. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/23/world/middleeast/23neda.html>. *The New York Times*.
- Gonzalez, D. (2014). "Keeping True to an Iranian Vision, Minus Big Money." Retrieved September 30, 2014, from <http://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/09/17/keeping-true-to-an-iranian-vision-minus-big-money/>
- Kamalipour, Y. R. (2010). *Media, Power and Politics in the Digital Age*. Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Tavakolian, N. (2014). Timeline Photos – Newsha Tavakolian Photography | Facebook. Retrieved September 30, 2014 from Facebook.com.
- Raley, R. (2009). *Tactical media* (Vol. 28): U of Minnesota Press.
- Varzi, R. (2011). Iran's French Revolution. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 637(1), 53-63. doi: 10.1177/0002716211404362
- Wolf, E. R. (1958). The Virgin of Guadalupe: A Mexican National Symbol. *The Journal of American Folklore*, 71(279), 5.

Samira Rajabi is a doctoral candidate in Media Studies at the University of Colorado at Boulder. She has her M.A. in International and Intercultural Communications from the University of Denver School of Mass Communications and the Josef Korbel School of International Studies. Her undergraduate degree is a B.S. in Entrepreneurship from the University of Colorado at Boulder. Her research focuses on representations and interventions to violence against women through the media as well as the use of online tools and social media in the wake of traumatic experiences. Using a strong focus on meaning making online, she interrogates multiple levels of trauma in diverse communities. She focuses on mediations and re-mediations of trauma as they relate to identity, race, ethnicity and gender. Samira has a strong grounding in feminist and gender studies as well as development as it relates to women. Her regional interests include Iran, the Middle East, as well as Central and East Africa.

God wears Tom Ford: Hip hop's revisioning of divine authority

Anthony B. Pinn

The poetic quality of music and the imaginative style of lyrical expression have given African Americans ways to describe and critique life arrangements within a society always on guard against challenges to the status quo. Over the course of my fifty years, I've grown into this truth.¹

First within the context of church work, I came to know and appreciate the manner in which music often challenged the sermon as the dominant modality of theologizing. Music marked out the various phases of Sunday worship, leading parishioners through the order of service from the precession to the benediction. It often anticipated and addressed their thinking regarding particular concerns. The rest of the week, once the worship buzz ended, music marked the rhythm of life, with its messages becoming magical mantras for church folk “in the world but not of it”.

Message in the music

Despite the spiritual aura, musical articulations of the gospel message flirted with secular modes of expression. Sometimes, the result – as in the case of traditional and contemporary gospel – was the Christian faith with a new rhythm. But as so many in churches feared, this flirtation with secular musical aesthetics could easily draw the unsuspecting Christian into a full embrace of godlessness. For example, contemporary gospel too easily softened believers to the allure of R&B and Pop. But for young people like me, warnings against this danger meant nothing. We were determined to like what we liked, play the music we enjoyed playing, and still show up for Sunday ser-

vice – singing, “This little light of mine...I’m going to let it shine!”

After all, like our parents before us (to the extent they’d admit it) we found something of ourselves – an epistemological recognition and existential comfort – in the “questionable” musical forms that kept us tuned in. And, as I was growing up, no musical genre expressed this better than rap music – that lyrical dimension of the larger cultural world of hip hop.

Rap artists spoke so creatively and compellingly that resisting their stories was a futile act. Their language – grammar and vocabulary – was organic and captured so much of what I knew and felt about the world, regardless of my Christian filter. They recognized an ontological “truth” that brought into focus both the promise and the pitfalls of life in the United States as – in my case – a young black male. This appreciation, to be sure, wasn’t without its tensions.

For instance, I was a Christian, but I was moving to the rhythm of rap artists whose ethics and moral codes were creative, organic, but not always in line with what I had been trained to privilege as proper conduct. In hindsight, this tension – at least in part – revolved around hip hop culture’s reframing of religious authority, done through a signifying of theistic structuring(s) of meaning.

But should I have expected anything less than this signification of theological themes and assumption from rap, the child of the blues? That is to say, hip hop culture in the form of rap music was simply the most recent incarnation of philosophical-theological counterpoint – the marginalized manifestation of poetic protest.

Church and playing with “God”

Rap music had me, and I didn’t mind or fight its grip on my imagination. This is despite the fact that I first encountered it while training to be a minister within the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

I was both insider and outsider – the young black male of concern within so many rap lyrics, as well as a minister-type who represented a particular hustle infesting black life. Put a different way,

many artists were speaking to me *and* about me. This made for a particularly stubborn epistemological dissonance. I walked the border between two worlds – hip hop and the church – finding in both something that appealed to my self-understanding and my relationship to human history.

Perhaps this was all a consequence of the world being a place of contradictions, of desires for meaning within a context best prepared to leave us frustrated and unfulfilled? My church life acknowledged this predicament but quickly turned to metaphysical claims. On the flipside, some rap artists brought into question many of my religious assumptions and shot holes in the narrative of ministerial excellence: the minister is the man (usually a man) closest to the will of God and best able to hear the voice of the Lord. No, rap artists exposed, in verse, the frailties of ministers and their abuses of resource and people. Lyrics, often without mercy, exposed ministers as pimps, frauds and other questionable figures; the holiness was exposed as hollow.

In a word, the preacher wasn't the only one who could weave a story, or frame moral and ethical obligation over against the cartography of life. The preacher might "whoop" but the MC spit fire, and that fire burned my mind long after the sermon (even my sermons) were over. Rap vibrated through my mind long after the echo of scripture had subsided.

Even after I left the church and rejected Christian ministry, I remained intrigued by rap music's ability to manoeuvre between worlds and in the process deconstruct and reconstruct religious sensibilities, responsibilities, and notions of authority. For instance, UGK argued that "the game belongs to me", and this allowed for a capturing of human agency or lucidity – and thereby an ability to work the systems of "production" to one's benefits.²

On top of this, UGK chronicled the structuring of life available to young people in the urban, southern context that spoke to the struggles for life meaning in ways that can't be captured adequately by the somewhat sterile and disembodied framings of life offered by many churches. Artists like the Geto Boys and then the solo artist Scar-

face chronicled in lyrics a life less certain. There is a roughness and grittiness to life within, for instance, "Mind Playin' Tricks on Me" and "Mind Playin' Tricks 1994" that speaks to the absurdity of our encounter with a harsh and unresponsive world.³ This harsh and unflinching take on life works over against the dream-like state of the church's response to the challenges of human existence – "Just a little talk with Jesus makes it right..." seems underwhelming in comparison.

Still, other artists pushed for the reconstitution of metaphysics to render theological themes highly unrecognizable to religious traditionalists. While examples of this abound, I think one of the more compelling would have to be Tupac's transfiguration of Christ in the form of "Black Jesus", who is the patron saint of thugs. Black Jesus's moral code runs contrary to the stuff of a standard Christianization of life; but what would one expect when this new figure of authority proclaims a genealogy composed of the thugs and killers? Rather than the biblical text, one could argue that Tupac – as Black Jesus at times – provides a sacred text written on his body, the ink of his tattoos over against the ink of the King James Bible, and this is coupled with the "10 rules of the game" over against the biblical Ten Commandments.

The new divinity

For some time now I have listened repeatedly to three tracks. The first is "No Church in the Wild" by Jay Z and Kanye West; the second is "Crown" by Jay Z; and the third is "I Am a God," by West.⁴ The first dismantles authority by cutting to the core of the Modern West – its traditions and epistemological safeguards. Jay Z challenges the framing of knowledge as associated with the Greeks by exposing the inherent bias in the crafting of knowledge; he dismantles the ethics of the Christian faith (the church), and challenges constructions of being that don't stem from a materialistic base – a hip hop twist on Sartre's proclamation that existence precedes essence.

What Jay Z and West offer in "No Church in the Wild" is a modality of the religious that reclaims its core meaning – to bind together. The authority of the metaphysical other – through re-

religious leadership for instance – can be dismantled because it can be challenged. In its place they establish a new religion framed by mutuality and, of course, lucidity – over against the violence, deception, and epistemological manipulation Jay Z exposes in the first verse.

West adds to this a new framing of ethics by maintaining the authoritative significance of the individual in connection to others. He does this by privileging exchange and consent as the bases of relationship. The chorus sums it up: “Human beings in a mob/ what’s a mob to a king/ what’s a king to a god/ what’s a god to a nonbeliever/ who don’t believe in anything?”⁵

This chorus exposes religious authority as premised on the crafting of stories and codes demanding and sanctioning compliance, and all this revolves around a privileging of obedience over will. Recognition of this situation, as West notes, as a point of theological insight, “is something that the pastor don’t preach, something that a teacher can’t teach.”⁶ It cuts against the authority of their pedagogy and flies in the face of their circumscribed and truncated ethics.

What Jay Z and West offer is not a mapping of life vis-à-vis negation – “thou shalt not...” – but rather it is premised on an affirmation: do as you like by means of consent and through recognition of mutuality present even in the context of a troubled world.

It is this reconstituted life (called a religion in the song) that makes possible the proclamation of divinity one finds in “Crown” – “you the presence of a king, scratch that, you in the presence of a god.” The miracles associated with divinity are distilled in this track and lodged in the workings of urban life, thereby marking out material desires. Jay Z (aka Hova), as god, pushes against restrictions, refusing to be “wiped out of history,” but instead imbuing said history with the narrative of urban miracles – “put in the belly of the

beast [New York’s public housing] I escaped/but a nigga never had a job.”⁷

He offers the American dream metanarrative turned on its head through an alternate epistemology of success, or salvation. “If it wasn’t for the bread,” he notes, “probably be dead.”⁸ The narrative of making it as a consequence of docility in the presence of the Christian God – who might give you a beat down, like Job received, but will finish the process by granting more stuff – is flipped and



Shawn Corey Carter, known by his stage name Jay-Z, is an American rapper, record producer, and entrepreneur. He is said to be one of the most financially successful hip-hop artists and entrepreneurs in America.

subdued by the metaphysics of a new saviour, aka the streetwise Jay Z and his communicative skills.

Like Black Jesus, Jay Z-as-god welcomes agency as a marker of having “game.” It is an authority premised on consistency rather than traditional markers of obedience – not following what others say, but doing what one does – i.e., “do you”. Divinity in this instance isn’t marked by super-human capacities to judge and punish; instead it is based on lucidity – awareness grounded in the material world and marked off by a measured realism embracing the workings of the world.

In “I Am a God,” West, having something of a split (divine) personality, constitutes Yeezus as a morphing of the Christological event and person-

ality so as to highlight the roughness of Christ's encounter with the world – not the garden and prayer, but hanging with the despised; not virgin-al qualities (tempted without sin as scripture suggests) but rather thoughts of Jesus with/in Mary. West, with a much more metallic and harsh tone, speaks his divinity by pronouncing a new relationship to the empirical quality of life.

Unlike Jay Z, West's divinity is not the most High, simply close to the ultimate source of truth, or the resurrection of hip hop as the epistemology of life. By controlling the life of hip hop, he controls ontology, epistemology, and the details of existential happenings. Again, lucidity – deep awareness of life – marks an intimacy with the dark corners of life acted out.

Whatever one decides to make of these claims to religion, or to divinity, the challenge to traditional modalities and framings of authority – religious authority – is clear and compelling. Chuuch! ■

Notes

1. I want to thank my graduate student, Biko Gray, for proof-reading this essay and offering suggestions for improvement.
2. UGK, "Game Belong to Me," *UGK (Underground Kingz)* [New York: Jive Records, 2007].
3. Geto Boys, "Mind Playin' Tricks on Me," *We Can't Be Stopped* (Houston: Rap-A-Lot Records/Priority, 1991); Scarface, "Mind Playin' Tricks 1994, *The Diary* (Houston: Rap-A-Lot Records, 1994).
4. Jay Z and Kanye West, "No Church in the Wild," *Watch the Throne* (New York: Roc-A-Fella/Def Jam, 2011); Jay Z, "Crown," *Magna Carta Holy Grail* (New York: Roc-A-Fella/Universal, 2013); Kanye West, "I Am a God," *Yeezus* (New York: Roc-A-Fella/Def Jam, 2013).
5. Jay Z and Kanye West, "No Church in the Wild," *Watch the Throne* (New York: Roc-A-Fella/Def Jam, 2011).
6. Ibid.
7. Jay Z, "Crown," *Magna Carta Holy Grail* (New York: Roc-A-Fella/Universal, 2013).
8. Ibid.

Anthony B. Pinn received his Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1994. Other degrees include the BA from Columbia University, and the MDiv and MA, both from Harvard. Pinn began his teaching career at Macalester College (St. Paul, MN), where his research and teaching earned him early tenure and promotion to full professor within the first eight years of his career. In 2003, Pinn accepted an offer from Rice University (Houston, TX), becoming the first African American to hold an endowed chair at the University. While at Rice, Pinn founded and directed the Houston Enriches Rice Education (HERE) project, now the Center for Engaged Research and Collaborative Learning. He is also the Director of Research for the Institute for Humanist Studies Think Tank (Washington, DC).



Why global Internet governance must matter to social justice activists

Seán Ó Siochrú, Sally Burch, Bruce Girard, Michael Gurstein, Richard Hill

What does the way the Internet is run have to do with development or social justice? Isn't it just for technical specialists, making sure everything works properly? Well no, actually.

The problem is that the Internet and how we use it is reshaping a fundamental dimension of human existence – communication: the space in which people communicate; the ways, traditions and cultures of interaction; how we form our affinities and construct our identities through the eyes of others; and increasingly too how we run the economy.

Internet governance, i.e. how we develop and implement the standards, rules and decision-making processes that shape the evolution of the Internet, is fundamental to how and whether that space encourages or discourages creativity, innovation, sharing, equality, privacy, freedom of expression; and whether everyone, no matter who or where they are, can access the space and its tools in a fair and equitable manner. In short, Internet governance determines in whose interests ultimately this new and evolving communication space will operate.

International Internet governance is not yet set in stone. Indeed it is in turmoil.¹ How that turmoil is resolved over the next few years will shape the Internet, and much of human communication, for decades to come.

The explosive spread of the Internet, partly over an existing telecommunication infrastructure, allowed it to slip through or sweep aside existing governance institutions

– even the smallest Internet-based initiative is, in a sense, born global. It is governed so far by a plethora of largely ad hoc entities, more or less interacting with each other, often largely undocumented. Headlines shout about governments trying to “capture” the Internet and strangle it with red tape; or (less so) background strings being pulled by global corporations and a few powerful countries.

Within the debate itself there is wide agreement that “multi-stakeholder” participation in governance is vital, but none about just what that means. Under benign-sounding phrases, a fierce struggle is underway. At the core of the struggle from a social justice perspective, is the extent to which Internet governance will, into the future, be democratic and genuinely inclusive, designed to create a communication space to promote the public interest and social justice, and to address the ever-widening divide between a privileged elite and the rest of humanity. Or whether the decision-making processes adopted will favour an even more commercially-driven space, carved and shaped in the interests of a few global corporations and a few neo-liberal western governments.²

Social justice activists, meanwhile, including media activists, sit mostly on the sidelines, bemused by arcane and impenetrable terminology, uncertain how to enter such a debate, and, most important, unconvinced that the issues merit the major effort required to intervene. After all, as long as access to the Internet continues to expand; email and the Web remain apparently open; social media can be deployed in ever more creative ways; and more and more innovative services are “free” – why should activists be concerned?

Surveillance and the right to privacy

Wholesale internet surveillance by governments, some mainly nationally, others on a global scale, exposed most spectacularly by the Snowden revelations, is the most obvious cause for concern. Social justice activists are rightly horrified in principle, not just at the blatant trampling of human rights, especially the right

to privacy, but in practice at the thought of every move, every email, every campaign, every struggle, being open to scrutiny; at the idea that everyday communication is simply no longer in any way secure, and lacks the basic protections we took for granted about the postal or telephone system.

But few have linked this monstrous system of surveillance to internet governance per se. The culprit is usually identified even by most progressive groups as over-zealous national “security” agencies unable to resist the temptation of technical tools that allow them access to more information than they ever dreamed of. But in fact this denial of privacy is deeply ingrained in the current internet governance system, both technically and in its historical underpinnings.

Twenty or thirty years ago, the engineers who laid the groundwork for today’s Internet were just trying to share scientific information within a relatively closed network of what were at the time powerful computers. They were not sharing photos on Facebook, doing their banking, organising demonstrations or planning their holidays. Privacy was not a concern because only a few hundred thousand were connected.

The communication protocols they developed did not foresee the massification of the Internet, did not take into account the interest of government security agencies to monitor our online activity, and did not imagine that companies like Google and Facebook would analyse the content of each and every email we send or “like” we click on in order to display targeted advertising. And they never imagined that online profiles developed by private sector companies to target advertising would be made available, with or without warrants, to government security agencies.

Whether the Internet favours privacy and facilitates freedom of expression over surveillance and censorship is largely a matter of the technical standards that are agreed to, part of governance. But many of the important actors prefer technical standards that compromise your privacy. Google, Facebook and others want to be able to scan your communication and deliver targeted advertising. Others want to scan it for even more invasive rea-

sons. Technical standards that could ensure secure communication haven’t been implemented simply because the current Internet governance structures have not made it a priority – so these structures do matter.

If the current situation is bad, the future could get a lot worse. The same intrusive technologies are capable of a lot more. In June 2014 Facebook was shown to have manipulated information in the news feeds of some 700,000 users in an experiment that concluded that it could alter their emotional state.³ What would happen if Facebook decided to alter users’ news feeds to affect the results of national elections, for example?

There are abundant examples of how traditional and relatively-regulated media tycoons (think Murdoch) have affected election results often with last minute scare-mongering banner headlines. What is the power of an unregulated Facebook in an election campaign, or at a crucial point in a government decision, armed with massive data about much of the electorate and control over the algorithms determining what they see on their news feeds?

The cost of a free lunch

Apart from privacy, a second set of social justice issues arises from the use of the plethora of “free” services from corporations such as Google, Twitter and Facebook, and from the business model behind this. Of course the services are not free. Users provide valuable data in exchange for them, used to target lucrative advertising at them. In fact, the data are far more valuable than the services, as evidenced by the huge corporate profits generated. Apart from the fact that people are not paid for the volumes of information they unwittingly provide,⁴ what is the issue here and how is internet governance implicated?

To start with, there is the matter of choice. Increasingly, Internet saturated societies have no real choice but to use for instance Twitter, Facebook and Google. Once these reach a critical mass of users, like Microsoft’s Windows operating system before it, it becomes virtually impossible to offer an alternative. The “network” gives rise to a natural monopoly that poses insurmountable

barriers to others, and offers huge opportunities to generate monopoly profits, profits which they use to extend their control ever wider. Yet Internet governance is characterized by a denial of the existence of natural monopolies. The dominant mantra is “governments should stay out and let competition take its course”, competition that in fact does not, and cannot exist.

But again, the question must be posed clearly: Where precisely is the social justice concern around such monopolies? Certainly excessive profits are not in the public interest. Monopoly control of the digital infrastructure over which the Internet is carried leads to higher tariffs which tends to exclude lower income users – an issue in itself. But there are deeper concerns about this model of corporate monopoly of the Internet platforms, secured through the delivery of apparently free services.

The commercialisation of every corner of the communication sphere

Such deeper concerns centre on the core Internet business model and the ethos it projects onto users, gradually internalising its tenets deeply within the public psyche. For not only does it rely on free donations of information from an ever expanding set of users, these users must also be consumers, and the more users focus on consumption, the greater the profits they deliver to their corporate owners. The more users can be transformed into carefully targeted consumers or corporate advertisers, the bigger the bonanza. This in turn subtly, and sometimes not so subtly, begins to shape the nature of the entire emerging communication sphere. A considerable academic literature is emerging about this.

Take Facebook as an example. The net effect of projecting “carefully controlled impressions of the self”⁵ may be to reinforce existing hierarchies and further strengthen closed communities, rather than to open out to new ideas and wider horizons. Identities may be prioritised around consumption rather than community-building for instance through expressing preferences in music, films, books or television programmes.⁶ Free self-expression can generate an illusion of

controlling one’s life, whereas in reality it is about controlling one’s image within a defined range of (pre)set pieces.

Personalised advertising and search engine filtering could further tend to reinforce existing prejudices and identity. “Our past interests will determine what we are exposed to in the future, leaving less room for the unexpected encounters that spark creativity, innovation, and the democratic exchange of ideas.”⁷ As some people confine most of their internet experience to one or a few social networking sites, they become “walled gardens”, each separated from the rest of the Internet and containing highly controlled and filtered information⁸ – leaving them exposed to the kind of Facebook manipulation mentioned in the experiment above.

Smart-phones and some tablets may also offer less than full Internet access, tethered to proprietary services and content ultimately leading to a “sterile” Internet.⁹ Further concerns raise the arbitrary manner in which some social media corporations control and even censor content – for instance a small corporate legal team decides what is suitable for circulation on YouTube and Google.¹⁰

Thus alongside the Internet’s, and especially social media’s, potential for innovative communication and cooperation are compelling dynamics that shape, filter, censor, restrict and control the use of the Internet. The business model might place potentially powerful tools in people’s hands at no cost, but it also drives much of the manipulation of and restrictions on this public space.

The mining and analysis of personal information, the creation of a “filter bubble” and localisation of advertising are carried out precisely to maximise the value of user profiles to advertisers; the emphasis on self-identities based on consumption all derive from the need to rapidly and easily expand the base of users; the “walled gardens” are about keeping users penned in as ideal advertiser targets; and the tethering of smart-phones and other communication devices to certain sources and content are about creating a captive market.

There are a few honourable exceptions to

this model – for instance Wikipedia and free and open source services and platforms – that pursue a commons based model and actively and deliberately pursue the public interest. Can we devise governance structures that can encourage these? Absolutely, we can. But this is not in the interests of those who dominate at present.

What is at stake here in the long term is hugely important – it is about much more than preferences or the “dumbing down” and manipulation of content. It is about the communication sphere within which people, especially young people, increasingly gain their basic understanding of society and themselves; it is about the parameters of what we can aspire to for ourselves and for society, and the limits of what we can individually and collectively achieve.

It is about a barrage of implicit messages that exhort people to consume, that repeatedly tell us that consumption is the sole route to happiness, that leave open few avenues of resistance and even fewer for people collectively to conceive of prioritising a more just and creative existence for themselves.

Of course, other media have over the ages been, and are, the subject of similar forces of commercialisation. The Internet-mediated sphere of communication, however, is shaping up to be the most powerful and all enveloping of all.

Inequalities

The original promise of the Internet was quite different. It was a space that would level out inequalities – those of location, of status, of opportunity. Yet even in the wider picture of the Internet, the opposite seems to be occurring across a wide range of areas. It is not an accident that the accelerating global inequalities, and inequalities within individual countries, have directly coincided with the advent of the Internet and the digitization of so much activity in the commercial world including the rise of totally digital products and production.¹¹

Far from equalising opportunities with the locational dispersion of resources and the means for effective participation, the Internet is shifting the advantage: wealth and the means for liveli-

hoods are moving from less favoured physical and social locations to more favoured ones. Thus access to a fast connection or a slow one, or even no connection at all, is very much locationally distributed and with it the opportunity to participate in or take advantage of that economic and other activity migrating to an Internet platform. Ever accelerating requirements for bandwidth leave those who are locationally disadvantaged – those who live in rural and remote areas, those who live in poorer and less favoured neighbourhoods, those who live in poorly serviced regions of the world – increasingly marginalized.

Similarly existing inequalities of wealth, education, linguistic and gender privileging are reproduced and amplified in the Internet sphere where technical, cognitive, linguistic, cultural and other barriers have been allowed

to grow, determining who has access to Internet-based resources and who doesn't. The favouring of certain languages, certain gender based cultural styles and practices, certain types of modes of communication effectively act to bar vast numbers from being anything other than passive consumers of digital products and communications when these are even technically available.

The concentration of the ownership of Internet resources – the infrastructure, the software, the services – in relatively few hands and locations is accelerated by the network effect where those who have (and are most effectively networked) get more, and those who have less (and have less means for effective network access and use) get less.

And of course with wealth goes power and the means to use this power to design ever more elaborate strategies to avoid paying a fair share of taxes while monopolizing digital activities (again using the network effect) to concentrate digital



commercial activity in a few hands and a few favoured national locations.

Influencing Internet governance: A way forward

Current debate on the future of the Internet and how it is governed can be hugely enriched by more social justice activists bringing their knowledge and experience to it. In fact their active contribution is probably crucial to a successful outcome, one that puts the public interest to the fore. The current constellation of forces is skewed by the huge resources available to global corporations and a few governments, and a handful of organisations with a stake in the status quo,¹² to ensure that the outcome will continue to favour their interests. Their influence among the ranks of civil society is disturbing. Some NGOs are little more than front organisations for corporate interests; others are influenced, knowingly or not, by major donations and other forms of dependence on private funding.

The idea that all stakeholders – multi-stakeholderism – can participate in governance is a central concept in the debate. The idea is attractive to corporate interests since in principle it elevates the voice of corporations to the level of all others – specifically governments. In practice, more importantly, it puts them firmly in the driving seat thanks to their unlimited resources and the backing of a few powerful governments.

For part of civil society, including members of the [Just Net Coalition](#), the key demand is that multi-stakeholderism must be democratic, transparent and accountable. A principle that stops simply at the participation of all stakeholders just hands the power to those with the deepest pockets and the biggest megaphones. The voices of poorer parts of the world, of disadvantaged communities and those not connected at all, and of the wider public interest, get drowned out – yet it is these that have most at stake and who must be heard. The legitimacy of governments to represent their people – flawed and all as some of them are – must also be given due recognition.

The additional weight of social justice activists and organisations, joining with those al-

ready in the debate, could be decisive in enabling a clearer, focused discussion on where the Internet should and must go. The Just Net Coalition brings together a number of such voices and welcomes more from those active in social justice and development issues. ■

For more information, visit the web site of the [Just Net Coalition](#). See also <http://www.waccglobal.org/news/net-freedom>

Notes

1. <http://gurstein.wordpress.com/2014/07/17/the-information-society-is-in-crisis-and-what-to-do-about-it/>
2. <http://www.itforchange.net/IT-for-Change-at-IAMCR-2014>
3. <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/jun/29/facebook-users-emotions-news-feeds>
4. Fuchs, Christian (2011) 'A Contribution to the Critique of the Political Economy of Google' in *Fast Capitalism*, Volume 8 (1), http://www.uta.edu/huma/agger/fastcapitalism/8_1/fuchs8_1.html
5. Fenton, Natalie (2012:127). "The Internet and Radical Politics". Chapter 6 of: Curran, James, Natalie Fenton, Des Freedman (2012) *Misunderstanding the Internet*. Routledge: London and New York.
6. Marwick Alice (2005) *Selling Your Self: Online Identity in the Age of Commodified Internet*. Washington : University of Washington Press. http://www.academia.edu/421101/Selling_Your_Self_Online_Identity_In_the_Age_of_a_Commodified_Internet
7. Pariser, Eli (2011) *The Filter Bubble: What the internet is Hiding from you*. Penguin Press: New York.
8. Berners-Lee, Tim (2010) "Long Live the Web: A Call for Continued Open Standards and Neutrality". *Scientific American*, December. <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/long-live-the-web/>
9. Zittrain, Jonathan (2008) *The Future of the Internet and how to Stop it*. Caravan Books. <http://futureoftheinternet.org/files/2013/06/ZittrainTheFutureoftheInternet.pdf>
Accessed 14 May 2012.
10. Freedman, Des (2012) "Web 2.0 and the Death of the Blockbuster Economy". Chapter 3 in Curran et al (2012).
11. Schiller, Dan (2014), *Digital Depression: Information Technology and Economic Crisis*, University of Illinois Press.
12. The largest of these is ICANN, the US-based organisation responsible for coordinating domain names and numbers. It projects 2015 revenue of USD159 million <https://www.icann.org/en/system/files/files/adopted-opplan-budget-fy15-16sep14-en.pdf>

The authors are members of the Just Net Coalition, a global network of civil society actors committed to an open, free, just and equitable Internet. The coalition's founding principles and objectives are contained in the Delhi Declaration <http://justnetcoalition.org/delhi-declaration>.

Voices of icons

Hans W. Florin

Religious icons had no prominent place in my life until, in the late 1980s, I sat alone in the chapel of a Romanian Orthodox Monastery. It was an overcast winter day, the dim reflection from the snow outside was all the light inside. It was quiet, when the heavy door behind me opened and a fully uniformed officer of the national army, a major perhaps, entered. He tucked his cap under his left arm, looked straight down the aisle and slowly moved toward the Iconostasis.

Once there, his eyes focused on the familiar threesome: Christ, to his left Holy Mother Mary and to the right John the Baptist. After he had taken in the icon-bearing wall of prophets and saints, the officer stepped to the left in front of a chest-high rostrum displaying the icon of the day: he nodded as if to greet a familiar face, then he bent down and kissed the icon. With an upright salute he turned and left the chapel!

What was this? Was it real? Why had an army officer of a Soviet-dominated country kissed an icon? What could be the motivation for such action? Was this an exceptional event – or a routine expression of Orthodox faith? With these questions came my interest in icons, just as later I have seen many uniformed soldiers, sailors and officers attending Orthodox liturgies behind the Iron Curtain.

Another unconscious contact with the world of icons happened when, after settling down as a resident in the USA in 2013/2014, my wife Ev and I paid a brief visit to the World Association of Christian Communication (WACC) office in Toronto. There, a former WACC colleague, hearing of my new interest, slipped a book into my hand with the remark “Have a look at this – and can you write an article on icons for the WACC journal?”

The book was *Icons of American Protestantism*, edited by David Morgan. When I opened it I found Sallman’s “Head of Christ”, the authentic version painted in 1940, on the title page. And in a flash I realised I had seen this picture a long, long time ago as a 13-year old school boy.

In the Easter recess of 1941 I was, for the first time in my life, alone in a train on the way to my grandparents. Across from me sat an elderly gentleman, dark-haired with kind features. During an occasional exchange of remarks about the passing countryside, this gentleman opened his briefcase and produced a picture. “Do you know who this is?”, he asked. My response was “No – but it looks like Jesus.” “Yes, you are right. And this is exactly how Jesus looked – one has found this recently in America!” I wondered by myself how this picture during the war could have come to Germany. And could Jesus really have looked like this? My father, a pastor, had shown me many different pictures of Jesus with the remark, “But how he really looked we do not know.”

Not until I found myself unexpectedly confronted by Sallman’s “Head of Christ” was I ever concerned about Jesus’ look. For me it was and still is enough that Jesus Christ is present for me in the sacramental bread and wine of the Eucharist. Nor is it necessary for me to have my Lord’s reality authentically preserved on an icon-like image. With this I end this brief reflection on protestant icons with a quote from Morgan’s book regarding Sallman’s “Head of Christ”:

“Created in a studio, manufactured in a printing factory, sold in stores, installed in homes and churches, exchanged as gifts and cherished as mementos, Sallman’s massed produced images belong to a cultural economy in which the inexpensive image is charged with crucial significance. It is this entire cultural system that has characterized the practice of what one might call the visual piety of twentieth century American Christianity in general and conservative Protestantism in particular.”¹

The pendulum of iconoclasm swings back and forth

Of course, down the centuries, there have been other holy pictures, among them renowned masterpieces, intricately painted, hung in homes, churches and galleries and stored in warehouses, particularly in Florence and the Vatican. And of some of these there are mass produced postcards. This art form emerged in the Renaissance and evolved from there into modernity.

But Orthodox iconography has its origin under the influence of the Holy Fathers of the Church and its Eastern form was beginning to take shape by the fifth century. The East Roman Emperor Leo III – possibly under the influence of an image phobic Islam – decreed the removal of icons from public and sacred places in 726, a decree which from 730 led to the destruction of religious icons and statues and marked the period called “Iconoclasm”.

Opposition to this iconoclasm, the Iconoduloi” (servants of holy imagery), gained strength against Leo III’s order and sought to reverse his decree. At the 7th Ecumenical Council of Nicea (787), Empress Irene reinstated the veneration of icons – leading to the general lifting of all icon prohibition by 845. (Bentchev, 1999).² In the West the Vatican almost completely ignored this iconoclasm. Roman popes already considered themselves not subject to resolutions of the Eastern Church.

In the East, at the 4th Ecumenical Council of Constantinople (869 – 870), the church resolved the final and authentic equality between word and picture, between Holy Scripture and revered icons. The relevant text reads:

“We decree that the sacred image of our Lord Jesus Christ, the liberator and Saviour of all people, must be venerated with the same honour as is given the book of the holy Gospels. For as through the language of the words contained in this book all can reach salvation, so, due to the action which these images exercise by their colours, all wise and simple alike, can derive profit from them. For what speech conveys in words, pictures

announce and bring out in colours.”³

By the ninth century the icon culture of the Eastern Orthodox Church was widely established. Through the following extension of orthodoxy from Constantinople to Greece, the Balkan countries and into Russia, iconography developed varied centres: Constantinople, Mt. Athos, Salonika, Bulgaria, Serbia and the famous Russian icon writing schools of Moscow, Novgorod and St. Petersburg.

Painting an icon (literally called “writing an icon”) was and still is a highly personal spiritual and meditative exercise. Often an iconographer was a monk. The spiritual discipline of monasteries guaranteed the space and tranquillity for the content and of each individual icon to evolve and the art and skills of the iconographer to mature. The tradition of iconography has remained very much an exercise of Eastern Orthodoxy.

Heavenly Liturgy. Michael Damascenes, second half of the 16th century.





Judgement Day. Russian, end of the fifteenth century.

However, it is well known that after the lifting of the Iron Curtain, Orthodox icons attracted the attention of western art lovers and dealers, who were willing to pay good money for hastily produced reproductions of traditional icons. The export of genuine icons is strictly prohibited. For international exhibitions, controlled exchange of icons can officially be arranged.

The voice of icons expresses the Orthodox faith which the early Fathers of the Holy Church formed during the first three centuries. This faith is steadily in communion with God, the Father of Creation; God the Son of the Word, of the New Covenant, the New Testament; and God the Holy Spirit, who is and remains with and within his church and her believers. This holy triune communion is at the core of religious communication, shared with us by all Orthodox icons.

Thus, the world of icons hangs together in the universe of salvation, expressing individual insights of this universe. There are also highly complex and spacious icons in which the angels of

the Holy Trinity guard the churches' ever present liturgy, God's on-going service to the world (see icon on previous page).⁴ Or the highly structured angel icon of the Judgement Day (icon, left).⁵

In the general order of icons, the most dominant one is always Jesus Christ, the Pantocrator, who rules and redeems the world. Next to Him, is Mary, the Mother of God, often in her colours of blue and sprinkled gold. She is probably reflected beyond orthodoxy in more icons than any other saint – well into the western tradition of the church. Pope Francis, in his *Evangelii Gaudium*, has these profound insights about St. Mary:

“At the foot of the cross, at the supreme hour of the new creation, Christ led us to Mary. He brought us to her because he did not want us to journey without a mother, and our people read in this maternal image all the mysteries of the Gospel... In her we see that humility and tenderness are not virtues of the weak but of the strong, who need not treat others poorly in order to feel important themselves.”⁶

Mother of God of Tsilkan. Georgia possibly 4th century. Other sources suggest the icon is in the Georgian style of the 8th and 9th centuries.



In further ranks of icons follow the arch-angels, Michael, George and Gabriel, the messenger of John the Baptist's birth. Moses, the law giver and the Old Testament prophets follow. Behind them one can find a mixture of regional kings, bishops, leaders and teachers of the Church. There exist books of saints listing their ranks and colours of display with explanations of their lives as examples for the godly life of the believer. They all are revered, respected and maybe asked to pray for the sins of the world. To the viewing believer, some icons speak of Christ's life from birth to death, resurrection and ascension. And some icons enlighten the believer with regard to the High Days of the liturgical year of the church.

In the Russian icon tradition there is a class which is quite unusual and therefore very remarkable for the direction of communication between icon and viewer: the icons of Holy Fools. The church has canonized people who don't fit into civil society, thereby revealing something of God which Christians may find embarrassing. "A fool for Christ," says Bishop Kalistos of Dioklea, "has no possessions, no family, no position and so can speak with prophetic boldness. He cannot be exploited for he has no ambition and he fears God alone."⁷

Among the holy fool icons, I especially like Saint Xenia of St. Petersburg (icon, top right). This Xenia was married to a colonel who drank himself to an early death. When, soon after her husband's death, Xenia began giving away her family's fortune to the poor as an act of Christ-like discipleship, the upset family sought to have her declared insane. "However, the doctor who examined her concluded that Xenia was the sanest person he had ever met."⁸

Another holy fool was Saint Seraphim of Sarov. He was born in 1759 and was made a priest in 1793. As a widely respected hermit he prayed for and helped the poor. It is said that he was visited in his cell in a forest by believers from all over Russia, including Tsar Alexander I, "who later gave up the throne to live a pious life in Siberia." Saint Seraphim was found dead in his cell on January 2, 1833, kneeling with crossed arms before the icon of Saint Mary.⁹



Similarly, Tsar Theodor, son and heir of Ivan the Terrible, though regarded by western diplomats as a weak idiot, was beloved by the Russian people. Throughout his 14 years on the throne, "He never lost his playfulness and love of beauty. He sometimes woke the people of Moscow in the hour before dawn by sounding the great bells of the Kremlin as summons for prayer."¹⁰ As a Tsar, he avoided war, bloodshed and oppression. With such merits, it is no wonder that the Church canonized Tsar Theodor as a holy saint whom iconographers depicted in "ropes and gorgeous vestments."

The most famous holy fool was Saint Basil "the naked prophet of Red Square" whose remains rest under the ninth dome later added to the octagon of St. Basil's Cathedral. Saint Basil despised corruption, rejected the honours and attention of rich but self-serving merchants and did not spare Tsar Ivan the Terrible from condemnation. Tsar Ivan the Terrible would have tortured or killed his critics and adversaries, but he recognized a gentle fool in Saint Basil, an honest and holy servant of Christ. The tsar regularly sent him food and

gifts, including pieces of gold. It is reported that Basil “gave a piece of gold to a merchant, considered to be rich, but Basil discerned this man had been ruined and was actually starving but was too proud to beg.”¹¹

Viewing icons of such Holy Fools, we can learn by their lives Christ’s admonitions in the Gospel!

Finally, there is what is considered by many to be the one icon which holds simply and tenderly all elements of the Christian faith: deep reverence, mystery, and by silently offering, shows despair, endless hope and the fulfilment of love. It is Andrey Rublev’s “The Trinity of the Old Testament” (tempera on wood, originally in the Chapel of the Trinity Monastery of Saint Sergius; now in the



Gallery Tretjakov, Moscow).

“From within this circle, this house of love, the mystery of God is revealed to us. It is the mystery of the three angels who appeared at the oak of Mamre, who ate the meal Sarah and Abraham generously offered to them and who announced the unexpected birth of Isaac (Gen. 18). It is the mystery of hospitality expressed not only in Abraham’s and Sarah’s welcome of the three angels, but also in God’s welcome to the aged couple into the joy of the covenant through an heir.”¹²

And, of course, the above interpretation of the three angels at the Oak of Mamre carries the viewer from the old to the new covenant, the Old Testament to the New Testament and thereby intimately to the Holy Trinity, God Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They are in meditation yet visually aware of each other’s presence. On the altar, Christ’s chalice containing a lamb (sacrificial lamb for Isaac’s life and Jesus the lamb of God and Saviour), looking at the right to the Father as if to say: “Father, I have fulfilled your order and redeemed your creation.” And to the left the Holy Spirit looks on and thinks of all the healing, comforting and making ready for the love of God which has yet to be done!

In such meditation picture and scripture, Holy Icon and Holy Scripture flow together and fulfil each other. ■

Notes

1. Morgan, David (ed): Icons of American Protestantism (The Art of Sallman), Yale University Press, 1996, New Haven and London, p. 22f.
2. Bentchev, Ivan, Engelikenen (Machtvolle Bilder himmlischer Boten), Orbis Verlag, 1999
3. Ibid, p. 167
4. Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium, 2013, paras. 285 and 288
5. Sobernost Quarterly of St. Alban and St. Sergius, No. 2, 1984
6. Forest, Jim, Praying with Icons, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY 10545, 1997, p. 140
7. Ibid
8. Ibid, p. 139
9. Ibid
10. Nouwen, Henri, J. M., Behold the Beauty of the Lord - Praying with Icons, Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1987, p. 23

Dr Hans W. Florin was General Secretary of the World Association for Christian Communication from 1976 to 1986.

Soft power and the Chinese dream (中国梦)

Jan Servaes

“The jury is still out on the Chinese dream. It is the favored slogan of the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, Xi Jinping, who took over as paramount leader in early 2013. Even for hardened apparatchiks, it seems a bit vague,” writes BBC correspondent Joe Boyle (2013) in his overview of the 11 slogans that changed China.

Sometimes the Chinese dream is of Sustainable Development, of Anti-corruption, of Constitutionalism, of a Clean Environment, or the Chinese dream of Social Harmony. Essentially, like the American Dream or any Dream for that matter, the Chinese dream can mean anything to anyone.

However, more so than in “democratic societies”, where dreaming is “free” and extensively discussed, the authoritarian Chinese government and Communist Party seems to have a problem as these slogans do not resonate with the broader public, neither nationally nor internationally. At an international level it is often combined with the concept and strategy of Soft Power.

Power: Hard, soft, partial or smart?

In all societies, power is based on two main fundamentals. The very first is the naked “political power (that) grows out of the barrel of a gun”, a famous quote attributed to Mao Zedong. No social order can persist without the monopoly of military might that is entrusted to the state. One only has to refer to the past or recent events in Iraq or Afghanistan, or to the current situation in Thailand, to find sad examples for such a claim.

The second important factor is the consent of the governed. Both elements are needed to achieve a stable social order. No government can survive based on might alone

and this is particularly so in democratic societies, where the consent of the governed has to be explicitly given every few years during more or less democratically organized elections. The discussion on power and its disguises shows us that the majority has to share a common world view claiming that the current social order is the best, the only one possible, or at least, the lesser of evils.

Such a worldview depends to a large extent on information and knowledge, which may or may not contradict the existing predominant world view. A small amount of dissonant information is not a problem as such dissonance can be explained away. A large amount of dissonance, however, may invariably lead to a *questioning of the status quo* (further elaborated in Servaes, 1981, 1989, 2013). In addition, “Two great power shifts are occurring in this century: a power transition among states and a power diffusion for the world of nation-states and the world of non-state actors” (Nye, 2011: xv).

The former dean of Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government, Joseph Nye, who introduced the concept of *soft power* in 1990, has argued that culture, political values and foreign policies have become new dimensions for international relations which are not directly dependent on the hard power of economics and military might. Soft power exercises influence indirectly by creating a certain climate, which may result in changes in influence over diplomatic decisions by the public opinion rather than by political elites only.

For countries with differences in political, economic and cultural systems, the best way to influence public opinion is to increase mutual understanding and respect of differences through positive media messages, and to encourage more cultural, educational and business exchange between countries (Cohen, 2011; Naim, 2013; Semetko, Kolmer & Schatz, 2011).

The initial concept of public diplomacy refers to *state-driven activities* such as scholarly exchanges, cultural events, and state-supported broadcasting to foreign audiences. Over the past decade, a *new public diplomacy* perspective



has developed which refers to activities that are beyond state actors. It has become a more fluid concept in the context of the new media and Internet environment (Servaes, 2012b). Nevertheless, it remains universally acknowledged that public diplomacy is targeted at influencing directly and indirectly public attitudes and opinions; and its ultimate purpose is to promote the national interest.

China versus US soft power

At present, the public diplomacy tools adopted by both China and the US are varied. However, according to a number of observers (see Brzezinski, 2012; Jacques, 2012; Shambaugh, 2013; Xiong, 2013), *China has a number of disadvantages*: (1) these public diplomacy tools are trying to win a foreign public's appreciation, but are not open to discussion because China remains an authoritarian regime; (2) most tools' policy effects are difficult to control or evaluate; and (3) at least until recently, China could not enjoy the "appeal" that Western nations, especially the US, had in the rest of the world: *cultural capital* and "national brands" such

as Hollywood, Silicon Valley, Broadway, great sporting events, mega-stars and celebrities.

As has been pointed out in some of the articles in a special issue on US-Chinese Mass Communication and Public Diplomacy (Servaes, 2012a), the staging of the Beijing Olympics, the Shanghai Expo, the opening of Confucius Institutes, the emerging interest in learning Mandarin, and the growing popularity of CCTV programs and blockbuster movies may have triggered the start of a change in this regard.

The Chinese Dream between ethics and strategic communication)

However, the Chinese Dream and Soft Power aspirations may also be shattered by the reality on the ground. That's where the interplay of ethics and strategic communication becomes important. While China may be learning fast how to move from propaganda to public relations or strategic communication, it still loses out in the battle of winning the hearts and minds of people (especially in the West, but increasingly also in other parts of the world – including China itself – see i.a. Barme,

2013; Hayden, 2012; Rawnsley, 2014; Schlosberg, 2013) on moral grounds (Wronka, 2008).

Let's take two recent events, which were reported in the media: China's anti-corruption campaigns, and the Confucius Institutes.

Anti-corruption campaigns.

Corruption is not typical to China; it undermines communities, institutions and countries in many parts of the world. The *Corruption Perceptions Index 2012* of Transparency International (2012) ranks countries and territories based on how corrupt their public sector is perceived to be on a scale from 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean). While no country has a perfect score, two-thirds of countries score below 50, indicating a serious corruption problem. China is one of these, it lists as the 80th with a score of 39.

"The well-publicized [trial of Bo Xilai](#), a former politburo member and populist politician, for corruption and abuse of power does not prove China is serious about

fighting corruption. Nor does it show that no one, not even a powerful politician, is above the rule of law. This elaborately choreographed prosecution is simply an exercise in demonstrating where power lies in an authoritarian state", notes Transparency International (2013).

Richard McGregor (2011: 138), the Financial Times' former China bureau chief, confirms. The anti-corruption commission, he argues, is toothless: "Corruption in modern China, with its surging wealth, proliferating business structures, walled-off government empires, massive vested interest and global reach, has simply left the commission's traditional methods behind" (McGregor, 2011: 141-2).

The regular stream of reports on crackdowns on corruption may make you believe otherwise. For instance, on just one day – 3 July 2014 – the Hong Kong based *South China Morning Post* published four articles related to corruption in China. However, to further complicate matters, one can



also read about the arrests and sentencing of *anti-corruption activists* for advocating that officials in China publish asset declarations (Denyer, 2013; BBC, 2014). In these cases the rule of law was used to thwart people who were actually proposing a policy that is known to help expose corruption, and, hence, in support of Xi Jinping's official anti-corruption campaign, one might think.

Not so. "Chinese leader Xi Jinping launched an anti-corruption drive when he took over in 2012. But he has also overseen the broadest crackdown on grassroots activism that China has seen in recent years", concluded the BBC (2014).

One explanation may be that the Communist Party considers the anti-corruption campaign an internal affair. Therefore, "citizens have no right to judge them, they are fighting corruption on their own," said lawyer Liang Xiaojun, who is representing one of the arrested activists. "But the one-party system has never been good at fighting corruption on its own. The contradictions just get increasingly sharpened" (quoted in Denyer, 2013).

An editorial in the *South China Morning Post* of 4 July 2014 seems to confirm this assumption: "It seems that graft is seen as so extensive that, for now, the symptoms should be tackled and contained in order to buy more time to tackle the root causes". No wonder that activists claim that Xi's anti-corruption talk is merely a smoke screen for the president that allows him to crack down harder on dissent.

They may have a point if one takes recently imposed *restrictions on press freedom* into account. For instance, on 9 July 2014, it was reported that China's State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television, banned reporters from sharing unpublished material on the internet or with overseas media: "The regulation would in effect ensure information is reported only after going through the tight censorship process" (Jing & Chen, 2014: A3).

Confucius Institutes

The other case I wish to mention is the recent call by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) to re-evaluate their relationship

with the Confucius Institutes in the name of academic freedom and integrity (Qin, 2014).

Officially, Confucius Institutes started in 2004 as non-profit public institutions affiliated with China's [Ministry of Education](#) to promote Chinese language and [culture](#), support local [Chinese teaching](#) internationally, and facilitate cultural exchanges. (Confucius Institute Online, <http://www.chinesecio.com/>). The program is overseen by [Hanban](#) (officially the Office of Chinese Language Council International) and governed by a council whose top-level members are drawn from [Communist Party of China](#) leadership and various state ministries. Worldwide there are more than 1,100 Confucius Institutes, based in and affiliated with academic institutions of higher education in 122 countries.

Confucius Institutes like to compare themselves with other cultural promotion organizations such as the British Council, [Alliance Française](#) or [Goethe-Institut](#). However, unlike these organizations, Confucius Institutes are managed by the Chinese government and operate directly on university campuses. This has raised concerns over their influence on academic freedom, the possibility of [industrial espionage](#), surveillance of Chinese students abroad, and concerns that the institutes present a selective and politicized view of China as a means of advancing the country's [soft power](#) internationally as political and controversial subjects like human rights and democracy, or Tibet and Tiananmen, are censored from the programs. For instance, under the title "Beijing's Propaganda Lessons", *The Wall Street Journal* of August 8, 2014, reported on the removal, stealing and censoring of academic materials during a recent conference of the European Association for Chinese Studies in Portugal.

Additional concerns have arisen over the institutes' financial and academic viability, teaching quality, and relations with Chinese partner universities. As a result of such criticisms, administrators at several institutions, such as the [University of Melbourne](#) and [University of Chicago](#), have opposed the establishment of a Confucius Institute. For more information, read an often-quoted article published in *The Nation* by Marshall Sahlins

(2014), professor emeritus at the University of Chicago.

Therefore, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP, 2014) has argued that the use of Confucius institutes in schools and universities raises questions about academic freedom and also makes U.S. universities complicit in cases of discriminatory hiring and censorship.

Conclusion

The Economist in a special issue on the Future of China sums it all up:

“Economically and militarily, China has come a long way towards regaining the centrality in Asia it enjoyed through much of history. Intellectually and morally, it has not. In the old days it held a ‘soft power’ so strong, according to William Kirby of Harvard University, that ‘neighbours converted themselves’ to it. Now, Mr Xi may know how to assert himself and how to be feared, at home and abroad. But without the ability to exert a greater power of attraction, too, such strength will always tend to destabilize” (The Economist, 2014).

In other words, there is still some way to go for China before its Dream comes true and its Soft Power will be appreciated and endorsed by people around the world (including China) as ethically sound and strategically commonsensical. ■

This is an abridged and revised version of the paper presented during the 7th Forum on Public Relations and Advertising, Mahidol University, Bangkok, 13-15 August 2014.

References

- AAUP (2014). On Partnerships with Foreign Governments: The Case of Confucius Institutes http://www.aaup.org/file/Confucius_Institutes_0.pdf (accessed 25 June 2014).
- Barme, Geremie (ed.) (2013). *China Story Yearbook 2012. Red rising, red eclipse*. Canberra: Australian Centre on China in the World, Australian National University. <http://www.thechinastory.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/ChinaStory2012.pdf>
- BBC (2014). “China joils ‘New Citizens’ Movement’ activists”, BBC News China, 19 June 2014 <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-27917234> (accessed on 27 June 2014)
- Bourdieu P. (1979) *La distinction. Critique sociale du jugement*. Paris: Minuit.
- Boyle, Joe (2013) 11 slogans that changed China, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-24923993> accessed on Dec 26, 2013
- Brzezinski, Zbigniew (2012), *Strategic vision. America and the crisis of global power*. New York: Basic books.
- Cohen, Akiba (ed.) (2011). “Special issue: Covering China – Inside and Out”, *Chinese Journal of Communication*, 4:3, September, 251-365.
- Confucius Institute Online <http://www.chinesecio.com/>
- Denyer, Simon (2013). “China arrests anti-corruption activists even as it pledges to oust dishonest officials”. *The Washington Post*. Wednesday, July 24, 2013.
- Hayden, Craig (2012). *The rhetoric of soft power. Public diplomacy in global contexts*. Lanham: Lexington.
- Jacques, Martin (2012). *When China Rules the world. The end of the Western world and the birth of a New Global Order*. London: Penguin Books.
- Jing, Li & Chen, Andrea (2014). “Information gag on journalists”, 9 July 2014, p. A3.
- Lukes, Steven (2005). *Power: A radical view*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- McGregor, Richard (2011). *The party. The secret world of China’s communist rulers*. London: Penguin.
- Naim, Moises (2013). *The End of Power: From Boardrooms to Battlefields and Churches to States, Why Being In Charge Isn’t What It Used...* NY: Basic books.
- Nye, Joseph S. (2004). *Soft Power: The Means to Success in International Relations*. New York: Public Affairs Press.
- Nye, Joseph S. (2008). “Public Diplomacy and Soft Power”, *Annals of the American Academy of Political & Social Science*, vol. 616, no. 1 (March 2008): 95.
- Nye, Joseph S. (2011). *The future of power*. New York: Public Affairs.
- Qin, Amy (2014). “US Professors Call on Colleges to Re-evaluate Confucius Institutes”, *The New York Times*, 17 June 2014 http://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/06/17/u-s-professors-call-on-colleges-to-re-evaluate-confucius-institutes/?_php=true&_type=blogs&r=0 (accessed 26 June 2014).
- Rawnsley, Gary (2014) Pew Research on China and the US: A Soft Power Dimension, 245 April 2014 <http://www.pdic.blogspot.co.uk/2014/04/pew-research-on-china-and-us-soft-power.html> (accessed on 1 May 2014)
- Sahlins, Marshall (2013) “China U.” *The Nation* (November 18, 2013). <http://www.thenation.com/article/176888/china-u>.
- Schlosberg, Justin (2013). *Power Beyond Scrutiny. Media, Justice and Accountability*. London: Pluto Press. ISBN: 9780745332918
- Semetko, Holli A., Christian Kolmer & Roland Schatz (2011), *News, International Relations and Public Diplomacy*, Paper presented at Conference on “The EU, US and China: Towards a New International Order” at the College of Europe in Bruges, Belgium, 22-23 April 2011
- Servaes, Jan (ed.) (1981). *Van ideologie tot macht*. Leuven: Kritak.
- Servaes, Jan (1989), “The many faces of power, ideology and culture. In search of a more interpretative communication research”, *Masscommunicatie*, 17, 2, pp. 146-160
- Servaes, J. (ed.) (2012a) “Special issue: The future of US-Chinese Media Communication and Public Diplomacy”. *Public Relations Review* (2012), vol. 38, # 5, December, pp. 643-938
- Servaes, J. (2012b) “Soft power and public diplomacy: The new frontier for public relations and international communication between the US and China”. *Public Relations Review* (2012), vol. 38, # 5, December 2012, pp. 643-651
- Servaes, Jan (2013) “The many faces of (soft) power, democracy

and the Internet”, in Servaes, J. (ed.) “Special issue: Focus on China”. *Telematics and Informatics* (2013), vol. 30, # 4, November, pp. 322-330.

Shambaugh, David (2013). *China Goes Global. The Partial Power*. New York: Oxford University Press, 423pp. ISBN13: 9780199860142

South China Morning Post (2014). “Journalist act in public’s interest” (Editorial), SCMP, 17 July 2014, A12.

The Economist (2014), China’s Future, Accessed on August 22, 2014: <http://www.economist.com/news/essays/21609649-china-becomes-again-worlds-largest-economy-it-wants-respect-it-enjoyed-centuries-past-it-does-not?fsrc=nlw%7Chig%7C22-08-2014%7C5-356be61899249e1cca2220f%7C>

Transparency International (2012). Corruption Perception Index 2012.

<http://www.transparency.org/cpi2012/results> (accessed on July 10, 2014)

Transparency International (2013). China: The politics of fighting corruption.

http://www.transparency.org/news/feature/china_the_politics_of_fighting_corruption (Posted on 28 August 2013, accessed on February 9, 2014)

Wall Street Journal (2014). “Beijing’s Propaganda Lessons. Opinion”, 8-10 August, p. 7

Wang, Jian (ed.) (2011). *Soft power in China. Public Diplomacy through Communication*. Palgrave/Macmillan, London

Wang, Xiuli & Pamela Schoemaker (2011), “What shapes Americans’ opinions of China? Country characteristics, public relations and mass media”, *Chinese Journal of Communication*, 4:1, March, 1- 20.

Wronka, Joseph (2008). *Human Rights and Social Justice*. Los Angeles: Sage.

Xiong, Chengyu (2013). “Coexist, Complement, Converge and Innovate: the Public Diplomacy of US-China Internet Industry Forum”, *Telematics and Informatics*, 30: 4: doi:10.1016/j.tele.2011.11.002

Zhao, Yuezhi (2008). *Communication in China. Political economy, power and conflict*. Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield.

Jan Servaes is UNESCO Chair in Communication for Sustainable Social Change, and Chair Professor and Head of the Department of Media and Communication, City University of Hong Kong. Email: jservaes@cityu.edu.hk

Religion in plain view

Manuela Kalsky

In December 2008 the Study Centre for Theology and Society of the Dutch Dominicans founded an Internet platform on interreligious and intercultural communication with the support of the Dutch Ministry of Housing, Planning and Environment (VROM). Five and a half years later this site has become one of the most visited sites in the field of religion, spirituality and interreligious dialogue in the Netherlands, with an average of 30,000 unique visitors a month. The website was part of a multidisciplinary research project “Searching for a new we in the Netherlands” of the Dominican Study Centre, where we reflect on social reality from a theological point of view.

How to find social cohesion in a highly individualised and at the same time multicultural and multi-religious society? How can we help to create a peaceful and just society that allows for people to live together in a multi-ethnic Europe? How can prejudice and fear projected towards people with other faiths and cultural backgrounds be dismantled without denying the problems that arise when people from different cultures and religions live together? How can we help our society to benefit from the fruits of cultural and religious differences in order to create the good life for all?

To me this “good life for all” is a secular translation of what we call in Christian terms the kingdom of God. So, as a theologian I am trying to find a broader language, more inviting words for a mixed religious, spiritual and/or humanist audience, to work together on what I think the message of Jesus is about: namely “doing justice to

Gods creation and looking after each other with passion and compassion.”

But before showing you what our answer to these questions looks like and how we try to invite people to think and communicate about this “good life of all”, I first would like to elaborate on the social context of the Netherlands, because the New-We-project is based on an analysis of the Dutch context. Some countries in Europe will have similar political and religious challenges, but of course there is also a great diversity within Europe. So what I will present is not a ready-made Dutch export product for Europe – every country will need its own new-we-concepts – but perhaps some insights will suit your own country. And let’s face it, creating a new-we-movement does not only require a transformation of a “we” which excludes people, it also needs a new “I”.

But it is not only a large number of Dutch citizens who do not want to be part of a religious community in the classical sense anymore. This trend can be seen all over Europe today. In general, Europeans do not want to represent a religious group anymore. They prefer to represent just themselves, or perhaps two or three others around them.

On the other hand the Dutch observe with trepidation Muslim solidarity and their sense of a religious “we”, frightened because of the events of 9/11 and subsequent terrorist attacks by Islamic extremists. Suddenly Dutch people realize that they no longer have a comparable sense of common identity to counter it. What do we actually believe in, and are we still proud of our country and our own culture? These are frequently asked questions. In the demarcation from others – above all from Islam – there has been a recurrence of national feeling, a desire for a well-defined identity and pride in the achievements of Dutch history, which was laid down in a cultural canon that children have to learn in school.

This “proud to be Dutch” approach resulted in a politically inward-oriented gaze, which disregards the fact that the histories of many Dutch people originated elsewhere. They have their roots in Turkey, Greece, China, North and South America, Asia, Africa and so on. Their cultural

and religious legacy will also determine the future of the Netherlands. There are African and oriental-looking young women and men in the Netherlands who, as soon as they open their mouth, exhibit an unmistakable local Amsterdam accent, as though their ancestors had never lived anywhere else than in the heart of the old city of Amsterdam.

They are migrant children who have grown up bi-culturally and/or bi-religiously and who are now, as the second or third generation of migrants, bearers of a hybrid identity. One third of the citizens of the bigger cities in Europe have a migration background. In the very near future we will need a common culture, in which mutual differences are made fruitful.

The right to “be different” is an achievement within liberal democracy. The struggle about the question which values – probably which religious values – should define society, is part of this democratic process. The debate on this question, in my view, must not be seen as a problem but as a privilege, for in an open society, which strives for individual emancipation as a human right, there will always be conflicts of interests. The common ground is that people comply with the law, with the rules that are laid down in the Constitution.

Let’s connect the differences

Of course, there is much more to say about the Dutch context but let’s go back to the New-We project now a trailer for which can be found here: <http://www.nieuwwij.nl/index.php?pageID=26>

Project We uses the slogan *Let’s connect the differences* and allows (young) people with different cultural and religious backgrounds to work together. The philosophy behind this slogan is that differences must be faced before something new can be built together. Accepting diversity means learning to think “in plural”. This is particularly difficult to the western mind-set, which is based on binary and unifying concepts. After all, it is not only the concept of culture in the modern age that is modelled on the idea of (national) unity. In Christianity, as well, unity is a central notion. “We are all one in Jesus Christ”, Paul states in order to strengthen the cohesive powers of the first

Christian communities.

But in the name of that same unity, those who had a different interpretation of faith than those in power in the Church were declared heretics. Unity is not only a peaceful concept, but often also a violent one. But can a community be based on diversity? Is it possible not to put “truths” at the forefront as a unifying element, but instead to embark on a common search? Is a truth thinkable, which arises through or in encounter and provides room for people with multiple or other religious identities?

Project We is not about giving answers in the first place but about asking questions. It aims at picturing the creativity and energy of people in the neighbourhoods of towns and villages and stimulating their ability to find their own solutions, making new common initiatives possible on a small scale. The project wants to stimulate people to assume responsibility and to show their strength instead of taking the part of the victim.

One of the most successful activities is a weekend in which Muslims and Christians are staying together in a monastery. The aim is getting to know each other better, building friendships and understanding the religious values in each other's lives. Much of the material is also used in schools and other multicultural meetings, as well as in lectures about “a new we in your neighbourhood”.

Developing a common culture

Without denying that living amid all those differences entails problems, project We focuses on the positive developments in an increasingly pluralist country. By doing this, We wants to motivate people to work on shaping their own lives and society in a constructive and creative way -- for words and images are not innocent. They are not only a reflection of reality, but also creating reality themselves.

Instead of fostering fear and cynicism, project We wants to promote the development of a common culture, in which mutual differences are made fruitful through participation. As long as diversity is associated with loss of identity and relativism of values, and the convictions of “the other”

are seen as a threat to one's own identity, there will be no room for a new We. Mutual acceptance and equality, while retaining and respecting differences, are indispensable ingredients for the development of new, sustainable connections.

This is why we chose the motto “We – connects the differences”. It underlines the necessity not to downplay differences in favour of commonalities in the search for mutual connections. We advocates facing the differences and making them fruitful -- moving away from either/or thinking and searching beyond prejudices with an open mind for an and/or approach.

The important questions of the moment are: How can we conquer fear of the other? How can we connect without having to become the same? What is at stake is not the search for a new big We, but rather the existence -- side by side and mingled -- of small “we's”, dependent on mutual communication and making connections.

Breaking down prejudice by encounters, promoting knowledge about and providing inspiration from various religious traditions, and stimulating communication about them with a view to creating a peaceful and just society: this is what project We aims at. It is the longing for new ways of connectedness by learning how to understand differences as an enriching part of life, because you learn to see reality through the eyes of the other.

To me it is very clear that if I want to take the signs of the times seriously and seek “the good life for all” amid the messiness of our daily life, I must make room for multiplicity. Multiplicity not only in one's own Christian circle -- no matter how important and relevant this may be -- but in particular in the sense of making room for the voices of the religious and spiritual stranger in our midst.

The burning question is: Will I allow this? Will I allow that this other interrupts my own narrative and disrupts my peace? That he or she exposes the assumptions in my thinking and acting, and questions my complacency? Do I have the courage to have my own limited view on the world expanded, meaning I may have to face things I would rather not see? In short: do I make

the other into an alter ego, into the projection of my own desires or do I sustain the opaque singularity of every human being?

Together with Emmanuel Levinas I would plead for the latter: no practice of “egology”, not determining the other from my own ego and reducing him or her to myself, but letting myself be surprised by the opacity of the other. For the Heidelberg theologian and missiologist Theo Sundermeier, who lived and worked in Africa for many years and who is an expert in the field of intercultural communication, wonder is the beginning of all hermeneutics. He writes:

“In wonder, I am open for the little, the humble, and in this I discover otherness, beauty, multiplicity. He who is surprised, is capable of endure dissonance with resignation and will not look for harmony too easily. For the dissonant, as well, belongs to the fullness of life.”¹

Diversity in search of connections

Today, to me doing theology means going to the virtual marketplace, where people meet each other in very different ways, playing with identities, narratives, imagination and desires and where God can be found in many spiritual guises. The game of theology has changed. The (non)religious other becomes a *locus theologicus*. As a consequence the slogan “unity in diversity” should be replaced by “diversity in search of connections”, searching for a new *We*. Or, better, searching for small *We*’s which are able to connect in a network which does not cherish the desire for fusion but can make a difference by building a society in which everyone can feel at home.

Whoever thinks that this is a utopian and naive idealism, is mistaken. It is the reality of the twenty-first century. The century in which the neo-liberal market thinking within a nation state - and the related excesses of egocentric wealth accumulation at the expense of both the majority of humankind and the earth’s natural resources - is running on empty. Creating social cohesion needs new and just connections on a local and global scale.

My answer to the question: “Does religion

in a pluralist society belong behind the front door or in plain sight?”, would be: We need the separation of religion and state, but this does not mean that religious people are forced to become schizophrenic – because they have to leave their personal religious inspiration for living their life behind the front door. There must be room in public space for non-religious and religious answers to questions on the meaning of life.

In spite of the secular prediction that religion will disappear, religion is still an important power in the lives of people – even in the secularized countries of Europe. We cannot deny that. So I would like to say to everybody who is engaged in religion and public life: Be aware of the images and words you are using about religion(s), because words and images not only reflect a reality, they also create a reality.

I think theologians who are engaged in public theology and journalists who report on the manifestations of religion can be bridge-builders and can help promote the positive forces of religion without denying that religion has negative power as well. In the end, it is your personal choice which aspect of religion you want to show to the public. ■

For more information: www.manuelakalsky.net and www.nieuwwij.nl

Keynote Address at the 18th European Television Festival of Religious Programmes, Hilversum, June 11-14, 2014 organized by WACC Europe and SIGNIS.

Note

1. T. Sundermeier, *Den Fremden verstehen. Eine praktische Hermeneutik*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Göttingen, 184-185 (transl. MK).

Prof. Dr. Manuela Kalsky is director of the Dominican Study Centre for Theology and Society (DSTS) in Amsterdam and in charge of the multimedia interreligious website Nieuwwij.nl. She is the holder of the Edward Schillebeeckx Chair for Theology and Society at VU University in Amsterdam. Kalsky studied theology in Marburg (Germany) and Amsterdam. She worked at the theological faculty of Amsterdam University (UvA), where she obtained her PhD on the theme of ‘Christology from the perspective of women in different cultures’. She was a guest lecturer in Vienna (Austria), Hamburg (Germany), Fribourg (Switzerland) and Hannover (Germany). Her research projects of the past years have focused on the transformation of religion in Europe. Presently she is in charge of a new research project on multiple religious belonging.

On the Screen...

Locarno (Switzerland) 2014

At the 67th Locarno International Film Festival (6-16 August 2014) the Ecumenical Jury, appointed by INTERFILM and SIGNIS, awarded its Prize to *Durak* (The Fool) directed by Yury Bykov, Russia (2014). The prize carries prize money of 20.000.- CHF, donated by the Evangelical Reformed Church and the Roman Catholic Church in Switzerland. It is assigned for the distribution of the film in Switzerland.

Motivation: The film (still below) tells a powerful and inspiring story which denounces a conflictive and corrupt political system in one day of the life of a small Russian town. Dima Nikitin, a young father and determined worker-student, goes against the social current with courage, honesty, humility and deep sense of responsibility. Through compelling acting and photography, the film paints a realistic portrait of radical goodness.

Synopsis: Dima Nikitin is a simple and honest plumber who works in a small Russian town. Except for his unusual integrity, nothing makes

him stand out of the crowd, until one night in a dorm mainly occupied by drunkards and outcasts, the pipes burst, endangering the occupants. Everybody needs to be immediately evacuated but nobody cares, so Nikitin sets off on a night-long odyssey to fight an entire system of corrupt bureaucrats.

Members of the Jury: Andreas Engelschalk (President, Germany); Alyda Faber (Canada); Blanca Mariá Monzón (Argentina); Milja Rado-
vic (Great Britain); Ingrid Ruillat (France); Florin-Ioan Silaghi (Romania).

Venice (Italy) 2014

The INTERFILM Jury at the International Film Festival Venice 2014 has chosen as winner of the 4th INTERFILM Award for Promoting Interreligious Dialogue the film *Loin des hommes* directed by David Oelhoffen, France (2014).

Motivation: With the film *Loin des hommes*, based on an Albert Camus story, director David Oelhoffen tells a parable of human relationship overcoming hostility. Two men share a common faith in mutual dignity even though coming from

different religious and cultural background and a unique friendship develops across cultural barriers. The director has managed to accomplish a film of clarity and ethical accuracy set in a striking Algerian landscape. The film displays the existential choice in every time to question corrupted cultural norms, prejudices and hatred. David Oelhoffen's story provides



a call to approve equality and life, acknowledging the other as your neighbour.

In addition, the jury decided to highlight the Out of Competition entry *Words With Gods* which shows the complex diversity of religious beliefs in different cultures and social environments. The power and the strength, the ambivalence and the danger, the consolation and hope of religion are put in nine different short stories directed by significant directors. This film is more than a personal statement or religious information about living faith; it is also a project for working on religious dialogue and tolerance.

“Each generation doubtless feels called upon to reform the world. Mine knows that it will not reform it, but its task is perhaps even greater. It consists in preventing the world from destroying itself” (Albert Camus in his Nobel Prize Speech, Stockholm 1957).

The Members of the Jury 2013 were: Tomas Axelsson, Sweden; Ralf Meister, Germany - Jury President; and Anita Nipah, Italy.

Montreal (Canada) 2014

The Ecumenical Jury at the 38th World Film Festival Montréal 2014, appointed by SIGNIS and INTERFILM for the 36th year in a row, gave its Prize to the film *Cape Nostalgia / Fushigi Na Misaki No Monogatari* (still below) directed by Izuru Narushima, Japan.

This is a gentle, high quality film about great moments of life – loss, love, friendship, and community in a Japanese coastal village. With humour and depth, the film celebrates humanity quietly and serenely. The photography is excellent, the direction assured and the film well balanced. In its conclusion, the movie moves away from nostalgia to embrace life.

The jury also awarded a Commendation to



Melody directed by Bernard Bellefroid, Belgium / France / Luxembourg.

A struggling young woman decides to become a surrogate mother, and she is accepted by a businesswoman, who has longed for her own child. The film explores sensitively the different facets of motherhood and affirms strongly the importance of bonding and maternal commitment. The movie has quality direction, dialogue and acting.

The Ecumenical Jury 2014 consisted of: Karin W. Achtelstetter, Toronto (Canada/Germany); Denyse Muller, Arles (France) – President; Peter Sheehan, Brisbane (Australia); and Tony Spence, Washington DC (USA).

Miskolc (Hungary) 2014

The Ecumenical Jury at the Miskolc Cine Fest (12-21 September 2014) gave its prize to the film *Bande des Filles / Girlhood* (still below) directed by Céline Sciamma (France, 2014) because it shows a strong young woman staying hopeful in an other-

wise hopeless situation.

Set in suburban Paris, and even though her circumstances such as poverty and living in a violent environment force her to make poor decisions, she stays true to herself and never loses the sense of what is right and what is wrong. She overcomes her personal struggles to find her place in life.

This film also shows the problems of many minorities around the world and supports the process of liberation.

The Members of the Jury were Szaboles Gebauer, Budapest (Hungary); Ana Lanuza Avello, Madrid (Spain); and Vanessa Locke, Berlin (Germany).

Warsaw (Poland) 2014

At the 30th Warsaw Film Festival (10-19 October 2014) the Ecumenical Jury, appointed by INTERFILM and SIGNIS, awarded its Prize to *In the Crosswind (Risttuules)* directed by Martti Helde (Estonia, 2014). The film (still on following page)



has been described as a “cinematic requiem”.

Motivation: Erna is an Estonian woman writing to her arrested husband and telling the story about her deportation to Siberia. With a firm grip of the technical possibilities: specially the walk among the living sculptures, the director lifts the story to a higher dimension - to a contempla-

based on letters, photographs, memoirs and interviews with witnesses of those events, the main inspiration coming from the diary of Erna, a young Estonian woman. (Festival information).

Jury members: Rev. Jes Nysten (Jury President, Denmark); Samuel Petit (France); Rafał Wieczyński (Poland). ■



tion of suffering, human eternal dignity and hope through an artful combination of pictures, words and music. A requiem for all the innocent people from Eastern Europe, who have suffered or died from oppression of the Soviet tyranny. We are not allowed to forget...

Synopsis: After Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia were incorporated into the Soviet Union, mass deportations of the native population took place. On 14 June 1941 at 3 a.m., the Soviet authorities began the deportation. Tens of thousands of people from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were sent to Siberia, first in lorries, then in cattle wagons. Among them was Erna, a philosophy student and happily married mother of a little girl. Separated from her husband, with her daughter and other women and children she travelled a long and tragic road to remote Siberian territories. There, humiliation, excruciating work, cold and hunger awaited them. She spent 15 years in Siberia. This riveting black-and-white, visually unusual film is

INTERFILM has a new web site

The Protestant film organization INTERFILM has developed a [new website](#) with a new structure, a new design and new tools. It offers a search facility for films given prizes by its juries, as well as a festival search; recommendations of DVDs, books, and film releases in cinemas.

Most entries are linked internally which allows visitors to find easily all information connected with a film, an award, a festival, or a person.

Founded in 1955, INTERFILM is an international network for dialogue between church and film, promoting appreciation of cinema's artistic, spiritual and social significance and calling attention to the relevance of theology and religion for cinema. ■