Media Development

Communication in Conflict Situations

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IN THE NEXT ISSUE

The working title of the 4/2024 issue of *Media Development* is "What future for critical and progressive news in an age of disinformation?" Have principles of independence, integrity, freedom, and truth been lost for good?

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EDITORIAL

"Media can provide vital information to people in humanitarian emergencies. It can also do much more to help people cope during emergencies, such as provide psychosocial support, connect people with others, prompt discussion, and motivate people to take actions to improve their lives," says BBC Media Action.

The same source also claims that, "Media broadcasts are particularly effective at improving people's psychosocial wellbeing during humanitarian emergencies. They helped people feel more hopeful, largely from feeling connected with others. They helped people realise that they were not alone and that people who could help knew about their situation and needs."

Reception of mainstream news reporting has suffered from perceived bias, spin, and hidden agendas. Research in 2017 indicated that a significant proportion of the public felt that powerful people use the media to push their own political or economic interests. Such views were most strongly held by those who are young and by those that earn the least.

Since then, with the increasing dominance of social media platforms worldwide and government control of the media in countries like China, Hungary, Iran, Myanmar, and Russia, genuinely independent journalism has struggled to maintain people's trust even with the assistance of fact-checking and trust-pilots.

In conflict situations, peace journalism and citizen journalism were once strongly advocated as alternatives to traditional mainstream news reporting. "Peace journalism is when editors and reporters make choices – of what stories to report and about how to report them – that create opportunities for society at large to consider and value non-violent responses to conflict."[1]

American journalist and freedom of expression advocate Courtney C. Radsch, in her doctoral dissertation (p. 159), defined citizen journalism as "An alternative and *activist* form of newsgathering and reporting that leverages networked social media and functions outside but in relation to mainstream media institutions, often as a response to shortcomings in the professional journalistic field, and which tends to be driven by different objectives and ideals and rely on alternative sources of legitimacy than mainstream journalism."

Both concepts find an echo in *constructive journalism*, the most recent manifestation of another way to conceive more balanced and useful journalistic practices: "Constructive journalism is a response to increasing sensationalism and negativity bias of the news media today. Its main mission is to reinstall trust in the idea that shared facts, shared knowledge and shared discussions are the pillars on which our communities balance – and it centers the democratic function of journalism as a feedback mechanism that helps society self-correct."[2]

In many ways, constructive journalism takes reporting back to independent journalism's core values, which require it to be balanced, fair, and non-sensational. Constructive journalism also promotes democratic conversation by fostering civil discourse. The aim is not to aggravate problems, spark conflict, or take a stance on divisive issues, but to facilitate critical debate about possible solutions so that the issue can be moved forward.

In the context of "Communication in Conflict Situations", constructive journalism works both to engender greater understanding by those on the outside of the situation, as well as greater trust by those on the inside. With the aim of reducing tensions, paving the way for dialogue, seeking solutions that are equitable and practicable, journalists can play a crucial role in advancing alternative solutions.

But there are obstacles. As Peter Prove notes in his article in this issue of *Media Development*, "[T]he threats to reporting, exchange of information and ultimately to the truth in the context of the proliferating conflicts around the world are not limited to the physical violence faced by journalists in war zones. The

repression of independent journalism by legal action and imprisonment is rising rapidly."

Reporters Without Borders draws international attention to the fact that attacks on press freedom around the world - including the detention of journalists, suppression of independent media outlets and widespread dissemination of misinformation - are intensifying. And, highlighting the grave situation facing reporters on the ground, a report from the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) notes that more than three-quarters of the 99 journalists and media workers killed worldwide in 2023 died in the Israel-Hamas war.

Despite these grim statistics, as Rousbeh Legatis urges in the Deutsche Welle interview reprinted in this issue, "There are therefore multiple opportunities for the media to play a constructive role in conflict transformation. Through their work, the media can strengthen dialogue processes by introducing and anchoring important issues in national and local discourses. They can help to break up stereotypes of victims and perpetrators and build up the public's knowledge about political decisions relating to peace deals and the like, thus making potential transformation processes more participatory."

Constructive communication both within and without conflict situations is vital to truth-telling, building trust, and helping resolve difficult and seemingly intractable challenges to sustainable peace. ■

Notes
1. Lynch, Jake and Annabel McGoldrick (2005). *Peace Journalism*. UK: Hawthorn Press, p. 5.
2. https://constructiveinstitute.org/why/

Freedom of expression, and the protection of journalists in conflict situations

Peter Prove

The first casualty of war is truth. This familiar adage has been attributed to many authors, from Chinese military strategist and philosopher Sun Tzu (c.544BC – c.496) and ancient Greek tragedian Aeschylus (c.525 BC – c.456 BC) to US Senator Hiram Warren Johnson in 1918. Indeed, the observation is effectively trite, since it is a conclusion that can all too easily be drawn from the common human experience of conflicts down through the ages, including – and perhaps especially – those of this current moment.

Along with truth itself, those who seek truth in the context of conflict often become victims of the violence unleashed in the confrontation between opposing military and political forces. This has particularly been the case in warfare in the modern era, due to the development of weapons with increasingly destructive power, the capacity to deliver destruction at ever greater distances, and often indiscriminate impacts (so-called 'smart' weapons technology notwithstanding). Alongside the technical evolution of weapons of war, developments in the field of communications technology have enabled propaganda to be deployed in more powerful, effective and insidious ways. Truth, and those who seek it, have become ever more vulnerable in face of this combined onslaught.

In the development of modern international law efforts have been made to establish principles that, among other things, afford protection to journalists and media professionals including while reporting on situations of armed conflict.

International human rights law – expressed especially in Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) – requires States to guarantee everyone the right to freedom of expression, which includes the "freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media". Accordingly, freedom of expression encompasses the right of the public to receive a wide variety of information provided by the media, as well as the right of journalists to gather and convey information. Article 19 (3) of the ICCPR allows for the restriction of freedom of expression if such restriction is provided by law, pursues a legitimate aim (such as the protection of the rights or reputations of others, national security, public order or public health or morals), and is necessary and proportionate.

Among the many international human rights mechanisms relevant to the protection of the right to freedom of expression and of journalists and their work,[1] the following play a special role:

* UN Human Rights Committee[2] (monitoring implementation of the ICCPR)
* UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression[3]
* UN Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders.[4]

With more specific reference to conflict situations, international humanitarian law (IHL) contains several relevant provisions.[5] The illegality of attacks on journalists and news media in conflict situations derives in from the protection granted under IHL to civilians and civilian objects generally. IHL distinguishes between two categories of journalists working in conflict zones: "war correspondents" accredited to the armed forces, and other "independent" journalists.

According to the *Dictionnaire de droit international public*, the former category comprises all "specialized journalists who, with the authorization and under the protection of a belligerent's armed forces, are present on the theatre of operations with a view to providing information on events related to the hostilities." Provided they have been duly authorized to accompany the armed forces, war correspondents – though not part of the armed forces and still retaining the status of and protections due to civilians – are entitled to prisoner-of-war status if captured by opposing forces.

In 1977, Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions (Relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts), extends the protection of IHL to other journalists who are not accredited to the armed forces. Article 79 of Additional Protocol I stipulates that all journalists "engaged in dangerous professional

missions in areas of armed conflict shall be considered as civilians" and "shall be protected as such under the Conventions and this Protocol, provided that they take no action adversely affecting their status as civilians."

While Additional Protocol I applies only to *international* armed conflicts, and Additional Protocol II (relating to the protection of victims of non-international armed conflicts) makes no specific reference to journalists, Rule 34 of the 2005 study on customary international humanitarian law published by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)[6] concludes that "civilian journalists engaged in professional missions in areas of armed conflict must be respected and protected as long as they are not taking a direct part in hostilities" whether in international or non-international armed conflict. So, while it is true that protection measures for journalists are only codified in the case of international conflicts (Additional Protocol I), journalists also enjoy the protection granted to civilians in non-international armed conflicts.

Civilian objects and military objectives

Radio and television facilities are considered as "civilian objects" under IHL, and Article 48 of Additional Protocol I requires armed forces to distinguish between civilian objects and military objectives and to direct operations only against the latter. It follows that civilian objects, along with the civilian population, enjoy general protection under IHL.

However, these protections can be lost. The protection of civilians (including journalists) persists under international law so long as they do not take any direct part in the hostilities. Likewise, the immunity enjoyed by civilian objects is lost if they are used in ways that make an effective contribution to the conduct of hostilities incompatible with their civilian object status, and they may then be treated as legitimate targets.

Nevertheless, journalists and media infrastructure cannot be considered legitimate targets merely because they are disseminating propaganda, even though such an activity may in-

directly support the war effort. An exception to this principle is recognized in relation to news media that disseminate propaganda inciting war crimes, acts of genocide or acts of violence – as in the case of Radio-Télévision Libre des Mille Collines and the newspaper *Kangura* in Rwanda in 1994 – which can become legitimate targets.

Even then, the lawfulness of an attack depends not only on the nature of the target – which must be a legitimate military objective – but also on whether the required precautions have been taken, in particular regarding respect for the principle of proportionality and the obligation to give due warning, so as to avoid, or at least limit, loss of human life, injury to civilians and damage to civilian objects.

Despite this complex web of principles under international law, recent experience indicates that observance of these protections for journalists and media professionals – along with observance of international humanitarian and human rights law in general – is fraying perilously. Declining respect for international law is greatly accelerated when leading members of the international community demonstrate obvious double standards in the application of these principles that should bind everyone equally.

And the extent to which civilians, civilian infrastructure (including especially hospitals and medical facilities) and humanitarian workers are now being attacked in Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan and in conflict situations elsewhere indicates a deep crisis of accountability to international humanitarian and human rights law. The activation of the leading judicial tribunals for adjudication of these matters – especially the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the International Criminal Court (ICC) – is therefore not only appropriate but urgently necessary.

Within the wider humanitarian catastrophe of the war in Gaza, journalists are being killed at a rate with no parallel in modern history. As reported by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), as of 31 May 2024 at least 107 journalists and media workers – 102 Palestinians, two Israelis and three Lebanese – were among the

more than 37,000 killed since the war in Gaza began.[7]

A 1 February 2024 press release by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights reports a variation on these statistics, stating that "since 7 October, over 122 journalists and media workers have been killed in Gaza, and many have been injured. In addition, three journalists in Lebanon were killed as a result of Israeli shelling near the border of Lebanon. Four Israeli journalists were killed by Hamas in the 7 October attacks. Dozens of Palestinian journalists have been detained by Israeli forces in both Gaza and in the West Bank where harassment, intimidation and attacks on journalists have increased since the 7 October attacks."[8]

Losing fragments of the truth

While the statistics may vary somewhat, the overall picture is clear. The highest recorded previous toll of casualties among journalists in a single year due to conflict is that in Iraq in 2006, when 56 journalists were killed. And as CPJ Program Director Carlos Martinez de la Serna poignantly – and relevantly for the purposes of this article – observed, "Every time a journalist is killed, injured, arrested, or forced to go to exile, we lose fragments of the truth."[9]

Another leading watchdog on the right to access to free and reliable information, Reporters Without Borders (RSF), has lodged three successive complaints to the International Criminal Court (ICC) – on 31 October 2023, 22 December 2023 and 24 May 2024 – with regard to alleged Israeli war crimes against journalists. RSF says it has reasonable grounds for thinking that some of these journalists were deliberately killed and that the others were the victims of deliberate IDF attacks against civilians.[10] According to RSF's tally as at 5 April 2024, at least 105 were killed by Israeli airstrikes, rockets and gunfire, including at least 22 in the course of their work.[11]

Gaza is, sadly, far from the only current context in which the same tendency is evident. For example, again according to RSF, more than 100 journalists have been the victims of Russian armed violence since Russia launched its large-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, eleven of whom were killed in the course of their work.[12]

Repression of independent journalism by legal action and imprisonment

But the threats to reporting, exchange of information and ultimately to the truth in the context of the proliferating conflicts around the world are not limited to the physical violence faced by journalists in war zones. The repression of independent journalism by legal action and imprisonment is rising rapidly. A CPJ prison census for 2023 documented 320 journalists behind bars, with the leading exponents of this form of repression being China, Myanmar, Belarus, Russia, Vietnam, Iran and Israel.

Censorship has long been a favoured tool of authoritarian governments, especially in times of conflict. The meteoric rise of censorship in Russia since its invasion of Ukraine, and in Israel against the background of the war in Gaza, are emblematic of this tendency.

Notoriously, independent journalists in Russia have been prevented from covering the activities of Russia's armed forces in Ukraine by the threat of 15 years in prison, following the adoption of a law on 4 March 2022 that criminalizes the publication of information that is deemed to be "false" or to have "discredited" the Russian armed forces. A further law adopted on 29 June 2022 applied the stigmatising "foreign agent" label to any person who has received international support or is "under foreign influence" and who carries out political activities, collects information on military and military-technical activities, disseminates messages to the general public or participates in their creation. Those on the government's register of entities to whom this label has been applied must declare that they are "foreign agents" on anything they publish.

This labelling aims to discredit media and journalists in the eyes of the public. It also imposes a heavy administrative burden, particularly the obligation to provide the authorities with

statements of all income and expenses. Failure to comply with these obligations is punishable by fines or imprisonment for up to five years.[13]

Since the beginning of the war in Gaza, Israel has taken a spate of legal and administrative measures targeting both the production and consumption of information deemed to be contrary to national interests. Emergency regulations passed in October 2022 enabled the government to close foreign news outlets considered harmful to national security and national morale, and on 8 November 2022, the Israeli Knesset passed an amendment to the Counter-Terrorism Law, introducing a new criminal offence for the "consumption of terrorist materials," with a maximum penalty of one year's imprisonment. The amendment criminalizes the "systematic and continuous consumption of publications of a terrorist organization under circumstances that indicate identification with the terrorist organization." This raises obvious concerns about the ramifications for freedom of expression and press freedom. The law's broad terms are amenable to being weaponized against journalists and others who consume information from sources designated as "terrorist" by Israel.[14]

Moreover, the weaponization of disinformation through social media, turbo-charged by artificial intelligence (AI) tools, is undermining people's capacity to distinguish untrustworthy content from accurate information, and weakening trust in the very idea of objective truth. This is a particularly acute challenge in the context of "information wars" accompanying armed conflicts, and in conflict-affected and divided societies where public institutions are weak and unable to neutralize such disinformation. While hardly a new phenomenon, latest generation communication technologies have exponentially increased the speed and spread of disinformation, and its impact in fomenting intercommunal division, hatred, distrust in public institutions, and heightened conflict risks in many current crisis situations.

The World Council of Churches (WCC) is alive to these threats, which are increasingly encountered in many situations in which we and our member churches and partners are working for peace, social cohesion and justice. We have been obliged to call more and more frequently for accountability to the principles of international humanitarian and human rights law,[15] because of the increasing frequency, severity and audacity of violations of these fundamental principles. We devote considerable effort to promoting social cohesion through ecumenical and inter-religious cooperation in conflict-affected or conflict risk situations. And we are increasingly highlighting the toxic effects of misinformation – disseminated especially through social media platforms and enhanced by AI – on social cohesion, stability and sustainable peace.

Re-asserting the principles of international humanitarian and human rights law

Faced with the global proliferation of gross violence and injustice, and the prevailing crisis of trust and human solidarity, the primary response must be to reclaim and re-assert the principles of international humanitarian and human rights law that were articulated precisely to guard against repetition of the horrors perpetrated during the Second World War. To undermine those principles through repeated violation, complicity or selective application is to promote a return to the status quo ante of "total war" instead of "just peace", of "might makes right" instead of the "rule of law".

The WCC, as an international church organization that contributed directly to the articulation of some of these core principles, has a special role and responsibility in this regard, together with religious leaders and all those with moral authority. If this framework of legal and ethical accountability where to collapse, no limits would be placed on the use of violence.

Further, churches and religious leaders have great influence among their members and in their communities, and in many places also with their governments. They can be powerful countervailing voices against disinformation and hate speech, if they are equipped and empowered

with the tools to identify and confront it. They can also be important supporters and advocates for journalists, media professionals and all those who seek the truth in the midst of crisis and controversy and to communicate that truth to others.

Finally, though it is evidently no guarantee of protection, scrupulous observance of the rules of professional ethics and independence of the press is even more important in the current difficult context, to help bolster recognition of journalists' civilian status against accusations of participation in hostilities or of providing military advantage to one side of the conflict.

The freedom of expression is a fundamental human right in international law, and a fundamental value for community life and for human dignity. Journalists and media professionals who face mounting threats for reporting and communicating the awful truth of conflict and its impacts are defending against an attack on human solidarity and human dignity itself. They deserve our support. ∎

Notes
1. More information on these mechanisms is available at https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/ruleoflaw/How-HR-standards-mechanisms-protect-journalists.pdf
2 https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/ccpr
3 https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-freedom-of-opinion-and-expression
4 https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-human-rights-defenders
5 Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, including the Third Geneva Convention on the treatment of prisoners of war and the Fourth Geneva Convention on the protection of civilian persons in time of war, and the Additional Protocols of 8 June 1977, especially article 79 of the Additional Protocol I regarding the protection of journalists engaged in dangerous professional missions in areas of armed conflict. UN Security Council Resolutions 1738 (2006) and 2222 (2015) reaffirm many of these principles. See also https://guide-humanitarian-law.org/content/article/3/journalists/ and https://casebook.icrc.org/case-study/protection-journalists for relevant commentary, on which several aspects of this paper are based.
6 Henckaerts, J.M & Doswald-Beck, L : "Customary International Humanitarian Law" Volume 1: Rules, ICRC, 2005, p. 115-118
7 https://cpj.org/2024/05/journalist-casualties-in-the-israel-gaza-conflict/, 31 May 2024
8 https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/02/gaza-un-experts-condemn-killing-and-silencing-journalists, 1 February 2024
9 https://cpj.org/2024/05/journalist-casualties-in-the-israel-gaza-conflict/, 31 May 2024
10 https://rsf.org/en/rsf-files-third-complaint-icc-about-israeli-war-crimes-against-journalists-gaza, 27 May 2024
11 https://rsf.org/en/more-100-journalists-killed-six-months-gaza-where-international-community, 5 April 2024
12 https://rsf.org/en/two-years-after-death-fr%C3%A9d%C3%A9ric-leclerc-imhoff-ukraine-rsf-and-family-french-journalist-call-justice, 30 May 2024
13 https://rsf.org/en/russian-journalism-chained-kremlin-s-systemic-censorship-0, 1 September 2022
14 https://cpj.org/2024/05/attacks-arrests-threats-censorship-the-high-risks-of-reporting-the-israel-hamas-war/#hostile-censorship
15 See inter alia the WCC 11th Assembly statement on "*The Things That Make For Peace: Moving the World to Reconciliation and Unity*", Karlsruhe, September 2022

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How the media can contribute to conflict transformation

Deutsche Welle

Rousbeh Legatis is a peace and conflict researcher, former UN correspondent and international consultant on the role of journalists as actors in conflict transformation processes. In a 2019 interview with #mediadev, he discussed how the media can participate in peacebuilding.

What role does the media play in conflict situations?

Neither mere peacemaker nor simple catalyst for conflicts, the media is an indispensable political actor in peacebuilding processes. On the discursive battlefields of already fragmented societies in conflict countries, the media and individual journalists play an important part in constructing conflict realities. They provide a daily stream of information and analysis on current events. Through their work, media professionals not only influence the perceptions of millions of readers, viewers, listeners and internet users, but also determine to a crucial degree whether and to what extent conflict actors recognize the array of constructive options available for resolving their differences.

What information does the local population need most?

In general, people living in conflict zones urgently need key information from reliable sources, enabling them to analyze and assess their own circumstances – and also to demand and legitimize acceptable political action. As an example: On the local level, a conflict situation might escalate to such a degree that it erupts into armed violence or perhaps even takes on dimensions that amount to war. In such circumstances, people living in affected communities will immediately need information about routes out of the combat zone and about water and food supplies. They will want to know where to obtain medical care, what rights they have in relation to state institutions and where armed groups are mobilizing.

At the same time, it is important to emphasize that conflicts never develop in a linear fashion or with a straightforward logic. Instead, the configuration of a conflict and its geographical development are constantly changing. The scope for action that exists within a given conflict widens and narrows, and this dynamic also affects journalists and their work.

In other words, in current civil war situations (such as in Yemen or South Sudan), people need direct humanitarian aid. News coverage of these circumstances is part of constructive conflict reporting. The moment that a peace deal is signed and (as in Colombia) a peace process is initiated, the range of media topics expands. For example, journalists should then begin to track down peace initiatives even in the most remote communities, feature them in their articles and thereby make them visible.

Obviously, they should not only highlight the tensions and challenges that emerge in so-called "post-conflict" scenarios by focusing critically on anticipated opportunities for transformation and strategies suggested by those involved, but also report on successes – both large and small and – in the implementation of the peace process.

It is important that journalists do not adopt a wholly pessimistic perspective, and thereby ignore smaller initiatives, for example at the local or regional level, that are quite effective in bringing about change in the conflict and its violent forms of expression. Peace education strategies, including successful examples and lessons learned when it comes to walking the walk, are another necessity in covering conflicts.

What challenges does the media face in conflict zones?

From my perspective, there are at least three dimensions to these challenges.

One is the need to develop a self-critical stance. Having worked for years as a journalist and as a researcher studying the media as an actor in conflict transformation, I have often observed a lack of critical reflection among professional journalists on prevailing ideologies – a lack of what in German we call "Ideologiekritik", which I consider to be very important in this context. All of us, including media professionals, are born into and socialized within a specific identity and an associated ideology.

If this socialization takes place in the context of an armed conflict, perhaps over several generations, we develop what is called a "conflict identity," which is characterized by ideological struggle, the internalization of destructive means of dealing with ongoing conflicts, and a fervent search for identity. In extreme cases, ostracization, exclusion and killing in the name of this identity can occur.

In conflict transformation processes, it is essential to deconstruct these entrenched and polarized identities – that is to say, to make them more comprehensible and thereby to make it possible to deal with or to transform them. Although they are not the only ones, journalists have an important role to play here: their job is to ask, to question things, to cast doubt by obtaining new information and presenting alternative narratives.

For that reason, it is recommended that journalists – before every interview, before producing any media content of any kind – be aware of and look carefully at the numerous and diverse facets of their own (conflict) identity, which they too invariably bring into the process. We live in multicultural societies with multicultural identities; in conflict societies, these are often heightened to an extreme degree. Anyone whose job it is to ask questions should first examine which facets of their own identity and what ideological socialization steers their questions – and in which direction.

The second specific challenge in these scenarios is that all the actors involved in a conflict pursue strategies to control communication and the flow of information. For that, they use a wide range of methods, from hiring high-paid public relations experts, to launching strategic communication initiatives, to destroying media infrastructure and engaging in psychological or physical violence against key civil society figures and media professionals. These actors include political parties, ministries, church institutions, non-governmental organizations, private companies and the media.

There are also actors who employ violence with varying degrees of legitimacy, such as the armed forces, the police, insurgents, paramilitary groups and private security companies. The aim of these actors is, on the one hand, to gain the consent of the population and, on the other, to delegitimize or displace alternative discourses.

The third dimension consists of the editorial and financial structures in which journalists are embedded, including wage disparities, economic dependencies, a lack of resources and pressure from editors-in-chief. What does this mean in practice? Here, we are talking about a lack of training in professional ethics and conflict-sensitivity. In certain political climates, those who engage in critical reporting must expect to face sanctions, threats or even death. Conflict actors may also attack with impunity, without fear that their actions will be promptly investigated – if at all – by the relevant authorities.

In addition, lobbyists and representatives of political institutions may attempt to obstruct investigative journalism by cancelling the advertising upon which many media organizations, above all community and local media, depend, or simply by ensuring that critical journalists in leadership positions are replaced. Finally, the work of journalists is also influenced by the preferences, interests, level of awareness and habits of their readers, listeners and viewers.

From a longer-term perspective, how can the

media contribute to peace?

It would be naive to think that the media alone can bring about peace. At best, they can contribute a series of actions leading, in the long-term, towards establishing peace-supporting social structures, by defining or reframing conflicts, initiating consensus-building and building trust within and between different communities. In recent decades, a range of peacebuilding-related media initiatives have been developed and implemented worldwide. In some cases, they have been used to rebalance asymmetrical power relations and to oppose or counteract hate speech and the propaganda of violent actors.

There are therefore multiple opportunities for the media to play a constructive role in conflict transformation. Through their work, the media can strengthen dialogue processes by introducing and anchoring important issues in national and local discourses. They can help to break up stereotypes of victims and perpetrators and build up the public's knowledge about political decisions relating to peace deals and the like, thus making potential transformation processes more participatory. They can raise awareness of the psychosocial effects of conflict. Through their work, they can also support reintegration processes of ex-combatants, including child soldiers, at the community level.

I am simply calling for a critical reflection on the role of journalists in light of the complex systems of relationships that exist, particularly in conflict settings. This approach by no means diminishes the importance of media professionals. On the contrary, it enables a more precise definition of their potential and scope for action in conflict transformation processes. After all, it is a journalist's job to research, to contextualize, and to select. But in doing so, the journalist is not impartial, but is guided by their own views and attitudes.

What is the task of journalists in conflict situations?

Constructive conflict reporting – in short, reporting that meets quality criteria – reveals more of a conflict's complexity than it obscures. We live in a politically polarized world, with many fragmented, multicultural, globalized realities, where exploitative neoliberal regimes are emerging and becoming dominant. However, the collectives that live in such societies are affected by these social determinants to varying degrees, intertwined in a complex web of interdependencies and interactions, where the space for self-determined action is changing very rapidly. At the same time, these life realities are intermeshed with complex discursive landscapes, consisting – once again – of a web of dominant and suppressed discourses.

Many of these realities remain invisible in the general debates and attitudes found in the media or political life. In order to make vital and valuable contributions to these social discourses (in other words: to contribute to constructive transformation), journalists must be aware of those issues that are generally suppressed or simply not addressed. This awareness is essential if they are to address these issues themselves. The precondition, however, is that editors and reporters are informed about the relevant debates – on post-colonialism (decolonialization), racism and gender, including their main lines of argument and problematic areas. Such a working knowledge is important in empowering journalists to heighten the visibility of local actors and communities and their views, experiences and decisions in mainstream discourses at the national level.

In terms of the media and journalism, what expectations do you have for peacebuilding decision-makers?

Peacebuilders must understand that journalists and the media are political actors who are not a possible risk factor, but are to be taken seriously and engaged with on an equal footing – and not from a perspective of manipulation or bias, guided by the question: how can we use the media in order to realize specific political projects? Such an attitude would simply reduce the role of the media to that of a PR agency, a position which is not only unacceptable but should be firmly re-

jected by journalists.

From the start, cooperation with the media must be proactively, and not reactively, built into the design and implementation of peacebuilding interventions, as they are able to identify and make visible the needs and ideas of the local community, as well as the resulting logic of action. They can update a community on events, provide individuals with information and explain the logic of action of a variety of actors, including peacebuilders.

Cooperation with the media helps peacebuilders make constructive contributions to conflict transformation processes, build capacity and act as multipliers for these processes. Neither the media nor peacebuilders alone can bring about peace. However, by connecting meaningfully with the other's work, they can create synergies, helping peace processes maintain momentum and reach all levels of society.

Cooperation with journalists and the media is therefore a key prerequisite for constructive conflict transformation. As intermediary social actors, they are a crucial element in sustainable peacebuilding at the local level.

To what extent can information and communication technology (ICT) and social media be used in peacebuilding?

In theory, ICTs and social media in particular offer the potential to dismantle hierarchies in the access to information and in the processing and dissemination thereof. Through ICTs and social media, anyone – not just journalists – can gather information without recourse to intermediaries and their possibly restrictive influence. In that sense, ICTs open up new pathways and channels for active participation for those who were previously excluded. They can give local stakeholders the opportunity to organize more effectively, to mobilize and to demand more inclusive peacebuilding.

In and of themselves, however, they do not prevent exclusion and discrimination. ICTs and social media are situated in tension between disempowerment, marginalization and empowerment.

Their use must be continuously assessed – just as the legitimacy of peacebuilding should, as a matter of principle, be continuously built and rebuilt. If this does not occur, there is a danger that power imbalances and marginalization are perpetuated, as the disparity between those who know how to work with ICTs – and thus can use these tools for a self-determined life – and those who do not becomes entrenched.

The starting point for all peacebuilding activities – and for all actors involved – is the local population. Changing or strengthening their consciousness and their perceptions is an essential element of a constructive conflict transformation. It is important not to be seduced by the hype surrounding new technologies and to remember that social media is a billion-dollar industry. That being said, under certain circumstances, peacebuilding can be enriched – and possibly strengthened – by ICTs. ∎

Source: Deutsche Welle. Interview: Alexander Matschke 25.01.2019 Permalink: https://p.dw.com/p/3BxWG

11 reasons to report on Disaster Risk Reduction

United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR)

The media shape how the public perceives the risks posed by hazards; these perceptions in turn influence the set of strategies for the mitigation of future vulnerabilities in the form of taxes, opportunity costs, lifestyle changes, and more.

1. DRR saves lives

Media coverage is a powerful tool that helps alert, inform and educate the public on disasters and the importance of disaster risk reduction (DRR). Not only does the media play a critical role in disseminating life-saving early warnings, it also helps focus attention, set the agenda for public discussion, influence political decisions and change public attitudes.

2. DRR is a political issue

As the frequency and intensity of disasters continue to rise, people demand that their governments take more preventive action and DRR becomes a more significant political issue. Climate change impacts, such as drought or recurring flooding, can trap people in a cycle of poverty and contribute to population displacement, further destabilizing fragile countries.

This has been the case in Afghanistan, South Sudan, Syria and elsewhere in recent years. The increasing damage from disasters will also make the case for stronger governance and closer regional and international collaboration.

3. Natural hazards are on the rise and will continue to make news

As climate change, poverty, urban risks and environmental degradation expose more people to an entirely new scale of devastation, natural hazards remain a serious challenge.

4. DRR is an economic issue

Disasters are becoming more expensive and they may also have long-term economic impacts in both developed and developing countries alike. In 2022, disasters caused damages worth about $270bn overall. But this is only the tip of the iceberg, as many disaster losses, direct or indirect, are not accounted for. Away from the macro data, disasters can devastate the jobs and livelihoods of survivors, often for years to come. Human stories can build strong narratives, helping to drive more action on DRR.

5. DRR is a human rights issue

Some humanitarian crises have implications for human rights. The weakest and the poorest in society are often the hardest hit and the last to receive the necessary support. Some extremist political agendas can use disasters to scapegoat and demonise affected groups.

On 28th July 2022, the UN General Assembly adopted a historic resolution, declaring access to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, a universal human right. The resolution, calls upon States, international organisations, and business enterprises to scale up efforts to ensure a healthy environment for all.

6. DRR is an environmental issue

Climate change and global warming are making extreme weather events more intense, frequent, and unpredictable. When they ravage ecosystems and habitats that are already degraded, then these events can quickly cascade to impact multiple sectors of an economy or society. Most disasters have an environmental angle, whether that relates to cause and effect, or to the preventive steps that could have been taken.

Refugees land on a beach near Molyvos on the Greek island of Lesbos, on 31 October 2015. They arrived in the boat from Turkey, for which they paid traffickers huge sums. They were received in Greece by local and international volunteers, then proceeded on their way toward western Europe. Photo © Paul Jeffrey.

7. DRR is a cultural issue

People have different perceptions of disasters and react in different ways. Some people ignore hazards believing that disasters are unpreventable. But many societies seek to identify risk and prevent disaster.

Traditional knowledge enables many communities to adapt their buildings so that they better withstand earthquakes or flooding.

The December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami killed some 230,000 people across Asia, but on Simeulue Island, just 40 km from the earthquake's epicentre, just seven people died out of more than 80,000. Tsunami knowledge had been handed down from one generation to the next, enabling people to survive.

8. DRR is a gender issue

In poorer countries, disasters tend to affect women and children the most. Women are more vulnerable because - compared with men - they tend to occupy a subordinate position in the family, lack control over the means of production, and have less mobility, education, employment, and calorie intake. In 2008, Myanmar's Cyclone Nargis killed twice as many women as men in the 18-60 age groups. Human stories about women leaders can make compelling stories, contributing to women's empowerment.

9. DRR is not only a disaster story

DRR stories do not just have to be about the disasters themselves. Journalists can also save lives by covering current risks and dangers, commemorations of past disasters, work to recover and reconstruct, or any other proactive measures such as education and traditional knowledge.

10. DRR is a health issue

Health systems must be resilient to provide immediate and long-term health care in the event of a disaster and to protect communities from natural and biological hazards. The inclusion of DRR principles in the design and construction of new health facilities does not have to be expensive. In fact, it costs just 4% more to make a hospital resilient and safe, a good investment if the hospital functions when it is needed most.

11. DRR is often an investigative story

Journalists do more than break the news. They can also hold their governments accountable, educate the public, and raise awareness of specific hazards. They can draw attention to vulnerability and exposure, and warn of potential disasters. Media can highlight bad governance, corruption, budgetary folly, and, of course, potential danger.

Source: UNDRR PreventionWeb

What's AI doing to information airways in conflict and crises?

Helen McElhinney

Recently, the UK Foreign Commonwealth and Development hosted a conference on the risks and opportunities of AI on humanitarian action. I kicked off my presentation on disinformation by asking the senior policy makers gathered a few questions about basic social media literacy: Can you reverse image search? Do you report concerns to platforms? The good news is most nodded. We are well over a decade into our "social media age", after all. The bad news is a new dimension to this old problem has now made it much more complicated, particularly for people affected by conflict and crises.

Information can be lifesaving in a crisis

People want to know which areas are safe, where their loved ones are, where to flee or seek medical assistance, or how to access aid. The ability to do so constitutes the basic health of information airways. The CDAC Network, where I've been Executive Director since October 2023, has long advocated for safe and trustworthy information for people in crises as a form of aid itself with early operational support dating from the Haiti crisis of 2010. We call attention to the health of information airways in crises and conflict, for support to media, and protection of communication channels to support people to make in-

Misinformation, disinformation and hate speech (MDH)

Hate speech, according to the working definition in the United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech (2019), is "any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor".

In the view of the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC): "Misinformation and disinformation can increase people's exposure to risk and vulnerabilities. For example, if displaced people in need of humanitarian assistance are given intentionally misleading information about life-saving services and resources, they can be misdirected away from help and towards harm.

Misinformation and disinformation can also impact humanitarian organizations' ability to operate in certain areas, potentially leaving the needs of people affected by armed conflict or other violence unmet. "

The AI-generated images of Pope Francis that fooled much of the internet was created in 2023 by the AI programme Midjourney.

formed decisions and have their voices heard.

Evidence has been gathered that the impacts of the degradation of the information environment can be acute in conflict and crisis settings, where trust is already significantly strained. In Syria, AI-enabled bots were used to flood social media with content that spread confusion and mistrust among people caught in the conflict; in Myanmar, AI-promoted mis- and disinformation was utilised by state actors to fuel elements of genocide in 2018 and continues to be used to inflame intercommunal violence. In Tigray, Ethiopia the European Institute of Peace concluded "*the people who suffered the brunt of the fighting became the "casualty" of misinformation, disinformation and biased reporting.*"

More recently, we watched a sophisticated disinformation operation precipitate further conflict in Ukraine in February 2022, and high level contestation of narratives, enabled by AI-capabilities, is underway in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. In most humanitarian crises, disinformation now runs alongside.

So what's changed? AI-enabled disinformation

The creation of synthetic content is skyrocketing contributing to a growing pollution of the information environment. As of August 2023, there were around 16 million hyper-realistic fake images online. Large language models (LLMs) can generate 20 tweets in just five minutes, enabling "personalised persuasion" at scale. Just recently, Google announced the integration of AI advancements in video and images, and OpenAI announced Sora which can generate video from text, making it easier than ever for anyone to produce incredibly convincing content.

Information warfare is old news. But today, sophisticated disinformation campaigns can be launched at terrifying speed and scale for a relatively low cost. These decentralised AI-enabled information operations are new. Disinformation-for-hire, often "computational propaganda" by private companies, has been emerging in recent years with state and non-state actors using it to fuel tensions, influence elections and push false narratives. These efforts are often well disguised as organic content, contributing to a growing architecture of deceitful information.

Information operations, within certain limits, are not traditionally a breach of international humanitarian law, or the rules of war. States must respect international humanitarian law and mitigate unnecessary harm, even when contracting a third party. This presupposes there are sufficient means to identify disinformation, anticipate its potential harms on civilians and sufficient methodologies to track and triangulate that causation. International law experts are grappling with this and wonder might new capabilities tip that balance?

Understanding the effectiveness of disinformation is not easy. Identifying the existence of manipulated methodologies online is a challenge as they are designed to hide in plain sight. The prevalence of closed platforms such as WhatsApp or Telegram can make them difficult to detect, even before attempts to assess the veracity and intent of the content. The general sense is that the most compelling fake content tends to be close to the truth, making it harder to identify and its origins sometimes impossible to source.

AI-enabled disinformation is only a problem for those online, right?

A key function of disinformation is to influence public discourse, whether people affected are online or not. This is done by promoting narratives that frame events in a way that is beneficial for the malign actor. It is vital to be able to understand what narratives are out there, how they are being promoted, whether they are being seen, and - crucially - how to respond in time. Often fragile and crisis affected locations are testing grounds for AI-driven disinformation campaigns. In places where official media was never trusted, the reliance on social media makes disinformation on those platforms pernicious.

Narratives can determine how minorities and crisis affected communities are perceived; how resources are distributed from donors and governments; and who is held responsible for inevitably

insufficient responses. The Overseas Development Institute, exploring this in the context of the humanitarian sector concluded, "Narratives and frames have greater influence on policy change than facts and figures."

So what does this mean for humanitarian action?

If the operating environment continues to distort communication channels with communities we must adapt. Although aid remains far from demand driven, the humanitarian sector has made commendable progress in commitments to greater accountability to affected people in recent years. We must update our understanding and capabilities to listen for and respond to genuine feedback despite the noise and manipulation of disinformation. We must deliberately seek out genuine criticism and frustrations from communities, as well as actively try to understand what they need and prefer.

Humanitarians are in a tough spot. We lack the means to help people discern reliable information at scale, and at the same time trust is eroding rapidly. We can see trends are worsening, that crises are increasingly hyper-manipulated, and we are sometimes caught up as direct targets of disinformation campaigns. This was reinforced to me in 2022 as an undercover journalist uncovered what humanitarians couldn't: a private company had been hired to smear and discredit a large and reputable humanitarian organisation. These direct attacks on aid operations undermine credibility and trust in humanitarian action broadly.

Journalism is vital in creating reliable content and promoting healthy information landscapes. Yet journalists are under unprecedented threat in conflicts. More than 100 journalists have been killed in Gaza since October 2023, while in Sudan citizen journalists are facing internet shutdowns as atrocities mount. Crises disrupt public service journalism: journalists flee and livelihoods disappear, the ability to verify sources in a hyper-synthesised world also slows down reporting, leaving a gap often filled by less reputable sources.

As colleagues at BBC Media Action reflected recently, getting it wrong once can mean losing trust built over years.

At the same time, our collective ability to identify and resist disinformation online is diminishing. Content moderation was always difficult but has worsened, as noted in a recent Internews report. Major social media platforms have laid off trust and safety teams as belt tightening measures – roles responsible to tackle deliberately manipulated content. Some platforms have also restricted academic access to data, meaning robust analysis can be out of reach for tech outsiders. The sophistication of video or image-based synthetic media products can be much harder for humans to analyse and assess.

Yet the AI systems, which replaced staff, often struggle to grasp nuance and slang used to evade detection. AI tools work best in English and other major languages, because that is how the foundational AI models were built. Although people are developing workarounds, for the foreseeable future it will be easier to catch an attempt to spark a run on a bank in New York than a massacre in Africa.

Who's paying attention to this new level of phenomenon? Who needs to?

This month, the UN published Information Integrity principles which provide a timely diagnosis of the wider problem in the information ecosystem. Although not fully focused on crises and emergencies, CDAC Network members provided input in the consultation. The principles signal a set of actions we can all rally around while balancing the critical right to information and freedom of expression.

Several CDAC Network members – especially those in media development – have been leading in tackling misinformation in emergencies for years. Their efforts prompted the publication of CDAC's 'Rumour has it: a practice guide". Members such as lCRC led the way commissioning work on the impact of harmful information on the safety and security of people in armed conflict, and the UN agency for Refu-

gees is also leading a body of work examining the impacts on those seeking refuge or displaced.

Our Community of Practice on Harmful Information offers a space for members to share challenges and planned efforts in response. Most recently, the group developed an accessible tipsheet for spotting harmful information in crises. Our discussions have also introduced ideas for ways to move forward.

What might locally-led solutions look like?

* **We focus on listening to communities affected by crises.** While there is a growing awareness of the impact of harmful information on humanitarian operations, understanding the explicit impact on crisis affected communities themselves is even more crucial. Information is a form of aid and means of protection in itself. How do communities themselves assess information, ascribe confidence levels and develop trust in sources? A recent CDAC panel at the Humanitarian Xchange, discussed one of the major drivers of people sharing mis/disinformation "*is that they don't feel seen, they don't feel heard, they don't feel acknowledged. The opposite of mis- and disinformation is not facts, it's acknowledgement.*"

* **We break out of silos and share analysis:** Specialists conducting disinformation analysis for commercial, or political purposes, may be able to make findings available for humanitarian action. Humanitarians are contracting new capabilities to spot narratives being tested in conflict and crises settings, to track uptake and impacts. Could we make this available to local communities and local NGOs? Such tools, data and the skilled people needed to wield it are expensive.

Can we reframe the problem?

* *Better diagnoses can improve the health of information ecosystems in crises.* Is disinformation worse in Ukraine, Gaza or Sudan? Is it better now than it was last year? If the presence of manipulated narratives has been identified at scale, have these been shared publicly or deliberately with communities affected directly? Could we develop classification tools to provide alerts when spikes in disinformation occur, similar to the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification? How can the new IPIE analyse conflict and affected contexts?

* *There are strong economic and financial drivers around disinformation.* The creation and distribution of false information is often done by young people on the ground, including some in refugee camps or crisis settings, who are paid by funders based elsewhere. Data and information are now – like oil, gold, and diamonds – a commodity that drives conflict. Code for Africa have reframed "disinformation-for-hire" as organised crime and there is a growing movement to advocate to demonetise and deplatform those who provide such services.

* *There's a clear need for human moderators, especially for underrepresented languages and dialects.* But the complexity of the task is increasing, and the wellbeing and labour rights of these moderators – many of whom from the global South – are of increasing concern as I learned directly from a brave content moderation whistleblower in Nairobi recently. Exciting initiatives such as the Data Workers Inquiry are seeking to support content moderators to organise. Perhaps it's time to grow a movement for "fair trade" social media.

It's always good to keep talking and sharing in this fast evolving space. If you want to follow our Network's efforts on this more closely, please get in touch. ∎

Helen McElhinney is Executive Directors of the CDAC Network – the global alliance of organisations working to ensure people can access safe, trustworthy information and communicate during crises. Previously a humanitarian aid worker and civil servant, Helen held senior advisory roles within DFID and FCDO, and worked at posts in Sana'a and Riyadh and across HMG for more than a decade. In recent years, Helen joined the International Committee of the Red Cross as Head of Policy for UK and Ireland. Helen has a Master's degree in International Relations from the University of Cambridge, an LL.M in Human Rights Law from the University of Glasgow and an LLB from the University of Strathclyde.

Community radios for peace building

Suman Basnet

Nepal suffered a decade-long civil war fought between the Maoist guerillas and government forces from early 1996 till the end of 2006; it ended with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Accord on 21 November 2006. The conflict caused the death of approximately 17,000, many non-combatant civilians included.

Although Nepalis have been exposed to news about conflicts coming from different parts of the South Asian sub-continent and beyond, no major armed conflict had been experienced by the country since the middle of the previous century. Although the armed conflict is over, and a new political system has been agreed upon and put into operation – the "supreme commander" of the Maoists rebels currently heads the Government, unique social, economic and political disputes exist, fuelled largely by historical and modern-day injustices and inequalities, and deeply ingrained discriminations.

Ironically, the armed conflict of the previous decade is so deeply etched in the minds of Nepalis in general and journalists specifically, most other conflicts are accorded much less importance, if not neglected altogether. These "other conflicts" include social conflicts arising out of deep-rooted discriminations based on ethnicity, caste, religion, gender, economic conditions, geography, etc. Most of these conflicts have existed in the Nepali societies since centuries.

Ending all kinds of discriminations and a bringing about a social transformation was one of the main goals of the Maoists led uprising.

Unfortunately, discrimination continues to exist in a major way, causing conflicts – some overtly and many simmering below surface, carrying the potential of causing serious social and political crisis in local communities. As it is, discrimination, deprivation and prohibitions are already causing unspeakable pain and injustice among the most vulnerable people in the society.

Caste-based discrimination is one of the most serious violations of human rights in Nepal. It is also a major obstacle to achieving sustainable development goals. Victims of caste discrimination are routinely denied access to water, education, health services, land ownership, markets and employment. The exclusion of Dalits and similarly affected communities by other groups in society lead to high levels of poverty among affected population groups and exclusion, or reduced benefits, from development processes, and generally precludes their involvement in decision making and meaningful participation in public and civil life.[1]

Women in Nepal face several inequalities and violence. The causes are diverse, but most of these are due to socially assigned lower positioning of women. The hierarchies based on power make women face subordination and violence in Nepal. Amnesty International, in one of its recent reports entitled "Nepal: 'No-one cares': Descent-based discrimination against Dalits in Nepal", states that authorities in Nepal are failing to protect Dalits, particularly women and girls, from systemic and widespread caste-based discrimination.[2]

According to the Asia Human Rights Commission, religious minorities in Nepal face structural discrimination and exclusion, and are highly vulnerable in the times of crisis. The Commission, in one of its reports, states that religious minorities are susceptible to discrimination in terms of enjoying their basic rights, especially in the times of disasters due to religious belief, discrimination, lack of education, poverty and lack of knowledge about their rights.[3]

Glaring examples of structural discrimination in Nepal are found in the civil codes. For

example, laws on citizenship and property rights favour men. On one hand, the constitution of Nepal confers equal rights to all, regardless of gender, and on the other hand, blatantly discriminates against women by limiting their capacity to confer citizenship to their children.

Voices have been raised by elected leaders against discriminations but changes have taken place at a painfully slow pace and much is left to be desired. The stakes are too high to leave the problem in the hands of the politicians alone; community led initiatives are required. Initiatives that that can help in bringing to the front, voices of those that are suffering and are vulnerable to discriminations are needed. Community media is a highly potent medium to give a platform to the marginalized voices and help communities play a role in addressing discriminations at the local levels.

Community media, especially community radios and local journalists have the highest potential for this kind of task, mainly because they are based in the local communities, understand local concerns and issues well, and speak the language of the community members. Community radio has always given a voice to the voiceless or those that have been rendered voiceless the system; its history is a testimony of this fact. It is the only form of mass media that allows for community participation in content planning and production, and in which the common members of a community can act as decision makers. These and many similar characteristics of community radio make it a highly viable and desirable means of communication to be used for challenging conflicts in local communities.

The role of community radio for peace building is not a Nepali phenomenon alone. Community radios across the world play pivotal role in addressing conflicts. In an interview given to AMARC Asia-Pacific, Adrian Louw, Program Integrator for Bush radio,4 South Africa said, "the key for community radio and a station like Bush Radio is that it is strongly rooted in the community it services – the volunteers, staff, trainees and board members are (all) drawn from that very community. Hence all issues that are dealt with by the station's programming are drawn from the very same audience it services. The station also makes various platforms available to engage with the community. Those who are directly involved in the radio station are merely the facilitators to bring those issues to a broader platform - using the FM frequency, and now it's significant social media presence."

He further said, "conflicts take various forms. For us, the issues range from socio-economic challenges to the effects of apartheid (which remain till today). We have developed a regular "staff development" session at the station which could include drawing in experts to help the presenters develop a better understanding of the challenges and the complex interactions that our history and political environment operates under."

Promotion of vital dialogue

One of the biggest strengths of a community radio is that it can initiate and promote dialogue between conflicting parties in a community, and dialogue often leads to solutions. Many times, problems remain unresolved because they are not addressed in a manner that is conducive to bringing about a reasonable conclusion. Trained local broadcasters can fill this gap through delicate handling of sensitive issues, making sure all parties are well represented and heard.

There are innumerable examples of community radios intervening successfully in favour of those that have suffered social discrimination, domestic violence, child marriage, stigmatization, etc. Adrian Louw of Bush Radio said, "We are not experts. Our role is to facilitate dialogue, and any conflict can only be addressed through dialogue to create understanding and practical solutions."

Social and political discriminations are not the only basis on which conflicts arise in local communities. There are other kinds of conflicts in which community radios can initiate mediation.

A recent case of intervention by commun-

ity radio Swagatam, located in the Dhanusha district in Southern Nepal is a case in point: A seemingly ordinary land related dispute between two neighbours quickly escalated into a major communal feud. It was a typical case of two feuding neighbours with local vested interest groups fuelling the fire. At the centre of this conflict stood Devu Yadav, the elected Ward Chairman, known for his affable demeanour and a knack for resolving disputes within the community. But, in an ironic twist, his very land became embroiled in a bitter feud. The source of contention was a plot of land, once tilled by Devu's ancestors, now a battleground between him and his neighbour Ramsaugarath Yadav. Boundaries blurred, lines crossed, and accusations flew like arrows in the heat of battle.

What began as a disagreement over land measurements soon morphed into a clash of egos and political affiliations. The legal process being excruciatingly long allowed the discord to escalate. The conflict between two neighbours turned into a dispute between community members who chose to side with either party. Some blamed the age-old rivalry between political fractions, while others pointed fingers at personal vendettas. But amidst the cacophony of voices, one truth remained unspoken, the rift threatened to tear apart the fabric of their closely-knit community.

It was in this tumultuous moment that the community radio team of Swagatam intervened. Armed with microphones and a commitment to truth, they ventured into the heart of the conflict, determined to unearth the untold stories hidden beneath the surface. What they discovered was a tapestry woven with threads of complexity and nuance. Behind the facade of political posturing lay stories of struggle and resilience, of dreams nurtured in the fertile soil of ancestral lands.

Through the voice of the radio, the community heard their own thoughts, the community torn asunder yet bound by a common desire for peace. Guided by the radio, the community members embarked on a journey of dialogue and understanding. Meetings were convened, grievances aired, and compromises forged in the cru-cible of shared thoughts. The walls of mistrust began to crumble, giving way to a newfound sense of camaraderie.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, casting a golden glow upon the reconciled land, the community knew that the true measure of their worth lay not in acres of land, but in the bonds of brotherhood. The community radio became a link for the community members to understand the truth that in the face of adversity, unity prevails.

In another incident that took place in the Shuddhodhan village of Rupandehi district, Nepal, 22 "non-Dalit" guests refused the feast at the wedding party of Ram Bahadur Bishwakarma's daughter. They attended the wedding party with an intention to humiliate the Dalit family. Ram Bahadur, member of the Dalit community, felt discriminated and humiliated due to their refusal to eat at the party and decided to return the money that was given as a wedding gift to his daughter by the so-called "upper caste" neighbours through the ward chairperson. Later, both parties agreed to hold a banquet with the participation of both sides.

However, the "non- Dalits" came in much smaller numbers, which led to further tensions between the two sides. According to Binod Pariyar, Station Manager of Radio Jagaran, he and his team intervened before the matter got out of hand and helped reconcile the parties, while upholding human rights and dignity of the Dalits. The matter was finally settled after Radio Jagaran followed up the issue with a series of stories and discussions.

There are many such examples of community radios playing a role in helping settle disputes, by itself or along with other local partners. Some of the most striking examples are found in the recent history of community radio in the Asia-Pacific region.

Indonesian community radios tackle peace

In the year 2004, community radios were set up for the purpose of conducting a peace campaign in Ambon, Aceh and Poso, Indonesia, to address

conflicts mainly between Muslim and Christian youth groups. Radios were established in areas considered neutral by the conflicting parties. The three radios that were successfully established at that time were Peace FM (107.7 FM), Maluku Bersatu FM (107.8 FM) and Amakora FM (107.9 FM). The process of setting up the radios was itself designed to promote reconciliation – the two opposing groups were equally involved in the setting up process, institutional development, and content planning, including the alternating coverage of religious events.

Several meetings brought the two groups closer together and removed the barrier of hostility that was previously strongly felt during the meetings. Various slogans emerged, such as: "Katong boleh Beda tapi tetap Basudara" (We may be different, but we are still brothers), "Conflict No, Peace Yes, Work OK", "Peace Mania", and others. This strategy was considered successful as residents of a number of villages got used to it and slowly mingled with one another.

Also in Indonesia, at the beginning of 2005, when the Helsinki Agreement had not yet taken place and the fighting between the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) and the Indonesian National Army (TNI) was still ongoing, five emergency radios were established to develop broadcast content for peacebuilding. The program that was quite popular at the time was a talk show in the form of testimonies of women who were left behind by their heads of families and had either died or disappeared because of conflict.

In his message in the AMARC Asia-Pacific publication "Nepal: Community Radio, Conflict Resolution & Peacebuilding", Dr. Ramnath Bhat, President, AMARC Asia-Pacific writes:

"Communities in the Asia-Pacific region are highly diverse in terms of ethnic identity, caste, language and culture. This diversity implies that various community groups have diverse worldviews, beliefs and perspectives which by itself, is a wonderful indicator of a vibrant society. However, societies are also deeply unequal and hierarchical due to historical reasons – such as the caste system, patriarchy, colonization and more recently, the globalization and financialization of capitalism. These forces in turn have compounded and become interlinked with other newer sources of conflict and suffering including the complex effects of climate change. The role of community broadcasting therefore becomes twofold: first, articulating how these global and historical issues are 'translating' or manifesting in the local and in the present, how they are shaping imaginations of the future; and second, facilitating and organizing voices from oppressed communities to emphasize their emancipatory vision that will improve lives of all people."

Even as the community radio sector is geared towards servicing the most vulnerable and marginalized, it suffers from a number of hurdles that prevent it from achieving its full potential for conflict resolution and peace building. Take for example, the case of disinformation and fake news giving rise to conflicts. The role of community radio in quelling fake news and disinformation for timely halting of misunderstanding and conflicts in communities is vital.

"Disinformation is often produced for and circulated at hyper local (village/district), local (state/provincial level), national and to some extent, international levels. Community radio broadcasters are most effective in countering disinformation circulating at state or national levels since these kinds of messages are fact-checked quickly and broadcasters can locate these fact-checked reports and use it for their own programming. However, community radio broadcasters have found it challenging to effectively counter disinformation produced and circulating at the hyper-local and local levels. In some countries, broadcasters are either prohibited by law or culturally discouraged to discuss electoral politics. Clearly, disinformation in this domain is hard to challenge or counter since doing so could involve the risk of upsetting powerful political actors and the radio sta-

tions could face adverse consequences. Similar risks are involved with countering disinformation in the domain of religion or faith."[5]

This is an example of an obvious impediment that community broadcasters suffer in playing the role of peace makers. It underlines the importance of greater emphasis on policy advocacy so that community radios can receive the attention that it justly deserves from national and international governmental and non-governmental agencies. Investment in enhancing the capacities of broadcasters so that they can effectively address conflicts to nip them in the bud will be highly worthwhile.

AMARC Asia-Pacific has initiated several activities to enhance the role of community radios in conflict resolution and peace building. It is already working with more than 100 community radios, reaching out to a million listeners. However, this is still a small initiative in relation to the vast expansion of community broadcasters in the region. There is a long path to be trod ahead and community radios need every bit of support that can be made available. ▪

Notes
1. https://shorturl.at/wLZqj
2. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9628167/
3. https://shorturl.at/N5lof
4. Bush Radio was established in early 1990s during the apartheid regime. For several years it operated 'illegally' and supported the movement for equality, human dignity and human rights.
5. Dr. Ramnath Bhat in Nepal: Community Radio, Conflict Resolution & Peacebuilding.

Suman Basnet is the Regional Director of AMARC Asia-Pacific, the autonomous regional chapter of the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters.

Communication in conflict situations

George Sahhar

Communication in conflict situations is inherently from the field up. It has to be about the people who need help due to political violence, natural disaster, or any other type of calamity. It is not about the institution offering the interventions, and definitely not about the humanitarian aid workers – otherwise the real story will be lost. This article focuses on the model I have been using in crisis communication over the years and explains how and why it developed the way it did.

The first time I worked on the issue was during the Israeli invasion of the West Bank in 2002. The approach I took was to prepare feature stories around the various calamity situations that had to be addressed. In doing so, the people's needs and fears were narrated, as well as the aggression they were subjected to.

During that invasion, I learned that policy for humanitarian aid cannot come from policy makers, it has to come from the people. The job of policy makers is to listen to the needs and to articulate it in a programmatic framework based on International Law and International Humanitarian Law, and on a set deliverables.

A common mistake we all fall into during communication in conflict situations, is that we do not always separate the forest from the trees, and we tend to think of humanitarian needs in general instead of looking at the inflicted communities at the micro level as well. For example, a certain community is besieged and needs water supply, this on top of the overall invasion oc-

curring in the community and elsewhere. Both micro and macro interventions are needed simultaneously, and neither can come at the expense of the other. Crisis communication during the 2002 Israeli invasion was not about looking at either the forest or the trees; more often than not it was a combination of both.

The approach I took during the invasion was to find ordinary people who suffered due to a specific human rights violation, and to have them tell us their story. The approach turned out to be most informative to policymakers locally and internationally. From the people we heard a detailed description of prison conditions, shortages of medical supplies, water depravation, extra-judicial killings, and home demolitions and indiscriminate attacks. The human story, therefore, led us to adopt intervention policies and to develop calls for action based on International Law and International Humanitarian Law.

In addition to the communication content that fed into policy and humanitarian interventions, there was also the need for a communication effort where immediate mitigation was needed at the micro level through international organizations in the field. For example, a woman on her way to give birth was trapped in an ambulance for hours and not allowed to proceed to the hospital, or a community under siege for days was running out of food. These were day to day unexpected occurrences that had to be addressed, and that had to have a designated person on standby to follow-up the communication and send alerts to international organizations.

Information integrity

The second time I dealt with crisis communication was in 2005 during the Israeli disengagement from Gaza. Knowing beforehand that it was going to happen gave me some time to plan, but no one had any idea how it was going to happen, how long it would take, and therefore what impact it would have on the civilian population in Gaza. It turned out that two million people were placed under curfew.

Before the disengagement, I made contact with community NGOs in the Gaza Strip, and one person was designated in each of the various neighbourhoods to send me an update everyday throughout the curfew that was announced in his or her community. The updates would include children's needs, medical needs, and women's needs. I would take the reports, look at trends, amalgamate them and send it for the world with a call for action.

One of the most sensitive aspects of the process that put pressure on the emergency communication staff is the need for urgent information, and the speed by which the recipients expect that information. Accuracy of the information, and the need to verify it, take precedence over speed. As the old saying goes "Better safe than sorry."

Sending out information under pressure that proves to be inaccurate damages the credibility of the information that will be sent out the next time around. So, my advice to those working during emergency situations is not to succumb to the pressure created by the need for speedy information. Always take your time and think twice before sending out something.

Another issue of great sensitivity is the preservation of the dignity, confidentiality, and wishes of the people we are trying to help. In our eagerness to tell the story, we must always slow down to make sure that the interviewed persons agree to tell the story the way we are telling it, and without any well-intentioned pressure created by communication workers. There are also safety needs, and we do not want people getting hurt after the story is published.

Overall, crisis communication is about people who need help. It should never be the story about the humanitarian aid worker nor about the organization doing the job, as this will dilute the focus of the communication effort. In the short run, the content we create must lead to proactive programmatic interventions, but in the greater order of things the content has ramifications for the dignity, safety, and well-being of the people we are trying to help.

More often than not, we tend to forget

that the content we create provides a historical narrative that will be revisited – possibly after many generations – by those who want to avoid the repeat of similar tragedies and who want to learn from the documented experience. Accuracy, and verifying the information before it goes out, are paramount when we think of our role in the long-run and how our work will be received. ∎

George Sahhar is a career advocacy and communication person. He has represented some of the largest projects implemented in the occupied Palestinian territories. The implementers and funders included CARE International, MWM Americas Inc, the United States Agency for International development, the European Union, the Middle East Partnerships Initiative, and Amideast. He also took up consultancies with the United Nations Relief and Work Agency for Palestine Refugees, UN Women, the German GIZ, and Italian Cooperation. George was part of the team that founded the Palestinian Education Ministry, where he served as International Relations Director. George is also a simultaneous interpreter and has worked with internationally renowned personalities, world leaders, as well as CNN and CBS. He is also a trainer of communication skills, mostly with the youth. George joined the Jerusalem office of the World Council of Churches in November 2021 as Advocacy Officer.

Health care for all – leave no language behind

CLEAR Global

Language rights are a vital dimension of sustainable development and humanitarian aid. The following article outlines why they are important, what lessons have been learnt, and how innovative technologies can help in crisis and conflict situations.

At CLEAR Global, we help people to get life-saving health care information and be heard, whatever language they speak. Good health care and well-being is a right for all, but it's not accessible for all language speakers.

Language is critical for achieving SDG 3, universal health coverage, and access to safe and affordable medicines and vaccines for all. In 2021, four and a half billion were not fully covered by essential health services, and 25 million children missed out on important immunizations. Inequalities persist, and exclusion disproportionately impacts the health and well-being of marginalized populations worldwide. We can only make universal health care a reality if we include all language speakers in conversations that affect their health.

Health care providers and aid workers struggle with what is known as "the last mile" – getting services and information to the most marginalized. For many, language exclusion compounds exclusion from basic services. People can't access health services or information if they aren't available in their language. People can't know what their medication is or how to take it if the package is unreadable. And care providers managing extreme workloads in multilingual contexts can't diagnose their patients if they don't know what word someone might use for "pain".

Not only does a lack of information worsen health outcomes, it also spreads distrust and disinformation among people in vulnerable situations. When clear, evidenced-based health information isn't available in someone's first language, rumours, anecdotes and misinformation might be the only health information they have.

For women, poor communication may contribute to pregnancy complications and maternal death. In Malawi, a number of studies report poor communication between some health care providers and pregnant women. Language barriers are part of the reason Indigenous women are more likely to die in childbirth and pregnancy and to lack access to maternal health services. Globally, a woman dies every two minutes from preventable causes related to pregnancy and childbirth.

Without training, research and resources in the right languages, health systems around the world fail to support already marginalized groups including women, people with disabilities, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. People risk falling through the cracks. And when the crack in universal health care coverage is 4.5 billion people wide, getting information and care into as many languages as possible is imperative.

Our team in Bangladesh, helps to put Rohingya people at the centre of the humanitarian response. We interviewed community members and service providers to understand how we can help uphold their right to access vital information and be heard. In our 2023 study, all participants stressed the importance of good understanding between patients and health care providers. But Rohingya people's needs often remain unmet due to inadequate resources and staff to support communication. When treating Rohingya-speaking patients, Chittagonian-speaking health care staff say understanding, translating and explaining medical terms is difficult and they lack time and support to address these challenges.

Cultural differences and lower levels of health literacy among the Rohingya community can cause confusion, stress, and frustration for patients. This translates to Rohingya patients not properly understanding medicine dosage instructions, with potentially serious consequences. A lack of appropriate language and communication support like sign language interpreters means people with disabilities face even greater challenges.

By supporting inclusive solutions you can help shift power structures so people who have already faced so much trauma can feel confident and respected seeking health care. You can give people the valuable opportunity to ask questions.

Language inclusion, misinformation and COVID-19

When the pandemic began, dangerous misinformation spread quickly through the refugee camps across the world, from false cures to a dangerous and frightening rumours about what happens to infected people. Misinformation and disinformation spread in 25 different languages across at least 87 countries, including the United States. The impacts are widespread, including violence, deaths and injuries blamed on misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy theories related to miracle cures. People need accurate information via communications channels they trust.

* In Bangladesh, Rohingya people reported negative and neutral experiences and made fewer visits to health centers. A mobile ban and information shortage made it difficult for aid workers to spread safe advice.

* In Nigeria, people refused the COVID-19 vaccine because they were led to believe it was a plot to reduce the population or alter their DNA.

What we've done about it

Our language data and communication tools are used in local and global health emergencies to improve two-way communications. Better communication enables more efficient crisis response, especially in linguistically diverse communities that are often most severely affected by events such as weather pattern changes and public health emergencies. Globally, our language dat-

aset is an invaluable resource for ensuring that communicators know what languages are appropriate.

Inclusive health information solutions: research and innovative technology

CLEAR Global has done research on health and language exclusion in many contexts. For example, in Bangladesh, we conducted research with health care service providers and their patients to learn how good language and communication practices help to provide quality, inclusive health care services to Rohingya refugees.

We used in-depth interviews and observations to develop practical actions for health care service providers and the health sector in Cox's Bazar. We've also investigated Rohingya experiences and perspectives relating to culture, language, and health. And we've developed recommendations for humanitarians on engaging and communicating more effectively with the Rohingya community on health issues and services:

* Train health care providers to understand and engage with the way Rohingya think and talk about symptoms and conditions.
* Recognize the cultural importance of informal health providers and potential ways to work alongside them to improve patient outcomes.
* Interpreters and cultural mediators can help establish trust and empathy, while training on Rohingya medical terminology can help bridge communication gaps.

Innovative technology

Designed to improve communication between aid workers and the affected communities, CLEAR Global's glossary apps provide clear and accurate translations of useful terms. Accessible on any device, online and offline, these tools help field workers listen to and better support people's access to information in some of the world's most linguistically diverse and challenging contexts.

* The Bangladesh glossary is in English, Bangla, Burmese, Chittagonian, and Rohingya,
with 300 terms on humanitarian aid, protection, return and relocation, health, MHPSS, gender, and more.
* The WFP Community Engagement glossary covers health care and diseases for affected communities in various contexts, with a total of 216 terms in nine languages including sign translations in Sinhala, Tamil and Chewa sign languages. The glossary was developed in collaboration with technical and sign language specialists and in consultation with WFP's accountability and protection team.
* The COVID-19 glossary identifies commonly used terminology and technical terms to develop a multilingual, plain-language glossary to assist field workers and interpreters engaging with communities to raise awareness. Available in over 60 languages, and in audio format.

Our conversational AI chatbots have supported access to information during health outbreaks. Unlike traditional bots, our bots use natural language understanding to create the look and feel of a real conversation. **Shehu** in Nigeria, and **Uji** in the Democratic Republic of Congo are designed to enable people to get accurate answers to their questions on COVID-19 and Ebola. The bots "speak" English, Hausa, and Kanuri (Shehu), and French, Congolese Swahili, Nande and Lingala (Uji), to deliver timely, reliable messages through Facebook Messenger, Telegram, WhatsApp, and SMS.

Instead of menus, users ask questions in whichever language they are most comfortable. They receive up-to-date information, based on Ministry of Health guidance. The bots "listen" to the users – letting them ask questions.

They can also detect new information gaps or concerns from users. For example, Nande speakers were asking Uji if Ebola could be passed from a pregnant mother to her child. Once we reported this trend, the authorities realized that there was no information on mother-to-child transmission and quickly put information out,

including through Uji.

The results

* 31 research products that inform the humanitarian community of communication and information challenges, leading to changed humanitarian strategies.
* Our bots engaged in over **100,000 conversations** with more than **10,000 individuals**, earning a remarkable **trust rating of 93%.**
* **1000s of people trained** with a **98% satisfaction rating.**
* Over **4,000** people have downloaded our language datasets.

To achieve the SDGs, it is critical that health information is in the right language and format. In real terms, this means ensuring health care providers can effectively communicate with patients, and that people can get answers to their own questions easily. By promoting language inclusion in health care, we will make significant strides towards leaving no one behind. ▪

Digital justice: Reclaiming a radically changed context

Alan Finlay, Valeria Betancourt, and others[1]

What follows is the Introduction to a special edition of Global Information Society Watch titled "WSIS+20: Reimagining horizons of dignity, equity and justice for our digital future", published in May 2024 by the Association for Progressive Communications (APC). It sets the scene for a revitalization of the vision adopted at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) two decades ago by offering analytical perspectives from civil society and social movements.

Twenty years ago, stakeholders gathered in Geneva at the first World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) and affirmed a "common desire and commitment to build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society."[2] This is considered a "first-ever, clear statement of political will on establishing digitally-connected societies for the benefit of all and harnessing information communication technologies (ICTs) to support development objectives."[3] Since the framework for cooperation was set out in the Geneva Plan of Action (2003),[4] much has changed in the global digital context, while many recognised challenges still remain.

Some of these changes and ongoing challenges include the following.

The capabilities of digital technologies[5]

The capabilities of global digital resources are significantly greater than they were 20 years ago. These include the levels of bandwidth available, the transition from fixed to mobile connectivity, the scale of data that can be handled by devices and by networks, and the range of services that are now available. The ways in which these capabilities have expanded the scope and range of services and applications is far beyond what was anticipated at WSIS when it first started. For example, mobile phones are hardly mentioned in the WSIS outcome documents, social media platforms barely existed two decades ago, cloud computing and the internet of things were in their infancy, and ecommerce was a fraction of what it has become. This has impacted on our understanding of digital inequality, its causes, and what it entails.

More people are online

Substantially more people across the world now have the opportunity to access the internet – from around 10% of the global population 20 years ago to about 70% now. However, easy access to high-speed internet is significantly biased in favour of developed countries. In many countries in the global South, the majority of people remain either unconnected or lack meaningful connectivity because they cannot afford to access the internet in a way that meets their needs, or do not have access to a stable internet connection.

Access has reinforced social inequalities

Barriers to internet access such as high data costs or education tend to mirror social inequalities in that they impact primarily the poor, in particular those in rural areas and women, with the result that the current pace and intensity of digitalisation has the potential to increase inequalities (referred to by Alison Gillwald as the "digital inequality paradox").[6] This is the opposite of the narrative 20 years ago, which persists until today, that digitalisation and infrastructure rollout would automatically result in greater socio-economic opportunities and equalities for most

people – a narrative that has turned out not to be true. Linked to this is the perspective that economic growth on its own results in social development and a reduction in inequalities and poverty, which undermines the development and social equity imperatives to act underpinning the WSIS goals.

Digitalisation is a cross-sector concern

Digitalisation and the impacts of digital growth are no longer a concern of information and communications technology (ICT) policy makers, digital rights actors or expert technical communities alone, but have cross-field and widespread societal ramifications. This has introduced new cross-sectoral dynamics for consideration and analysis, and raised questions about who should be involved in deliberations. However, the aim of mainstreaming the use of ICTs across sectors envisaged in the WSIS Action Plan has also been uneven due to a lack of political will, low technological capacities and resources, poor inter-ministerial coordination, and poor programme design and follow-through, among other factors. In many areas (e.g. education), tech corporations, through well-resourced lobbying, have crowded out initiatives that respond to public interest concerns.

More people are aware of digital rights issues than before

Many digital and internet rights issues have become mainstreamed, such as those concerned with freedom of expression online, internet shutdowns, privacy, disinformation and online security. While this broad public awareness and concern is critical to the development and use of digital resources, in many instances it has also led to a preoccupation with the social harms that digitalisation can produce, rather than a foregrounding of the opportunities that ICTs can enable for social good. This preoccupation has impacted negatively on policy making, has been used to justify authoritarian measures, and has resulted in restrictions being imposed on access – which has created further barriers for uncon-

nected communities to get meaningfully online.

The complexity of governance frameworks

The governance frameworks for internet access and digital technologies have become much more complex compared to 20 years ago, with multiple forums and processes that are often difficult for civil society actors, particularly from the global South, to access, understand and influence. The task of building effective governance norms and standards has in many respects also become more complex due to innovation in areas such as artificial intelligence (AI), quantum computing and robotics, and, for instance, the need to harmonise regional regulations in areas critical for countries to benefit from digitalisation and datafication (e.g. for taxation, or cross-border data flows).

A flagging commitment to multistakeholder participation

WSIS as a process was strongly shaped by the voices of governments and non-state actors from developing countries. Contributions from the global South were strengthened through regional preparatory events that saw collaborations emerge between governments and civil society that were essential to the WSIS outcomes, and also between global civil society and businesses (for their part, big tech companies had limited influence at WSIS 20 years ago). The multistakeholder approach was fundamental to the development of the WSIS Action Plan, and a formative approach for many subsequent governance deliberations, including at the national level in some countries. However, a commitment to this approach appears to be faltering. In particular, the influence of the big tech sector has significantly strengthened. Civil society participation in governance spaces, meanwhile, is becoming increasingly difficult, and the voices of civil society marginalised. This includes when it comes to proposing effective ways to further the multistakeholder approach as the basis for consensus building, decision making and the democratic governance of digital policy issues.

A much more powerful big tech sector

The structural role big tech firms play in multiple spaces and areas of service provision, and the dependency of markets on the corporate tech sector, suggest that the impact of any regulation is likely to be limited and compromised in curbing big tech's influence and power. That governments often use private sector platforms to deliver public services, and depend on the use of these platforms for surveillance and other mechanisms of control, has also aligned the market needs of the private sector with the desire of governments to manage their citizens and peoples. However, there are often few mechanisms ensuring transparency and accountability with respect to privacy, data use and algorithms, or on the nature of the arrangements reached with the platforms. In this context, there is a pressing need to push for the adoption of global principles or frameworks in multilateral forums to regulate big tech and to set parameters for the state use of platforms in the global governance of digital technologies.

An unsustainable internet

The environmental footprint of digital technologies and infrastructures has multiplied exponentially, is likely to continue to grow exponentially with the intensification of data economies and the widespread use of AI, and is environmentally unsustainable due to resource scarcity, a substantial increase in emissions due to our use of technology, and linear rather than circular economic development. A paradox has emerged where technologies are often presented as a panacea for mitigating or adapting to climate change, but the development and use of technologies themselves contribute substantially to climate change, as well as environmental and social harms for marginalised communities most immediately affected by the climate crisis.

In 2003, the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) together with the Campaign for Communication Rights in the Information Society (CRIS) published *Involving civil society in ICT policy: The World Summit*

on the Information Society.[7] The publication was designed to build awareness among civil society organisations of the nascent WSIS process, and their capacity to engage in WSIS.

This was followed by a GISWatch special report in 2013 called *Communication rights ten years after the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS): Civil society perceptions*,[8] in response to the WSIS+10 review. The report, which was the result of a survey and interviews, discussed a number of areas such as freedom of expression and public debate, access to technology and cultural rights in communication, as well as the fragmentation of the communications rights movement.

This special edition (May 2024), published at the time of the WSIS+20 review process, is driven by at least three framing questions:

* What should the role of WSIS be in the future in the midst of other processes shaping the digital terrain and its governance?
* What are its key and unique strengths?
* How can civil society – as well as governments – best respond to the changed context in order to crystallise the WSIS vision?

While the reports published here may not answer these questions directly, in different ways they inform further consideration of the questions by civil society organisations and governments.

In its interaction with other key ongoing processes, such as the Pact for the Future and the Global Digital Compact (GDC), and the need to build synergies among these processes, WSIS+20 is an opportunity to contribute to and reinterpret the WSIS vision. This needs to respond to the fact that internet governance and digital cooperation are interlinked, and that both need to take into account the realities of the constantly changing digital societies that we live in today. Moreover, as the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) mandate beyond 2025 will be considered by the review, WSIS+20, like the GDC, is key to strengthening and expanding the mandate of the IGF. The IGF remains at the heart of the internet governance and global digital cooperation

ecosystems – there is no equivalent space for enabling public participation and shared learning on the positive and negative impacts of the internet and internet policies in a multidisciplinary and multistakeholder way.

As it stands, there is a danger that the architecture of digital governance emerging, fragmented as it is, is likely to reinforce the structural inequalities that are being amplified by digitalisation, rather than recognising these inequalities and their causes as unjust, and collectively committing to address these.

Ultimately, WSIS+20 needs to reflect the type of digital future we want and identify what we need to do to build this future. It could be a unique opportunity to place global digital cooperation – working towards both global and contextual responses – at the top of political agendas to address the persistent and emerging challenges in the digital age, including the environmental crisis. It could be used to ensure that the lessons learned from years of multistakeholder engagement feed into future governance processes and set the parameters for safeguarding inclusive dialogue, transparency and accountability. It could also renew and strengthen the mandate of the IGF and bridge the gaps between deliberative spaces and decision-making processes. As many of these reports suggest, the extent to which this will happen remains to be seen. ∎

Reprinted with permission. The entire Special Edition of GISWatch 2024 can be found here, and back issues of the journal here.

Notes
1. The introduction is based on the concept note developed for this special edition of GISWatch. The concept note was compiled through invaluable input from several people, including Anita Gurumurthy, Anriette Esterhuysen and David Souter, as well as a number of APC staff members. In some instances, contributors allowed us to use their input and comments verbatim, and this is gratefully acknowledged here.
2. Internet Governance Forum. (n/d). WSIS+20 and IGF+20 Review by the UN General Assembly (2025). https://www.intgovforum.org/en/content/wsis20-and-igf20-review-by-the-un-general-assembly-2025
3. Ibid.
4. International Telecommunication Union. (2003) World

Summit on the Information Society Plan of Action. https://www.itu.int/net/wsis/docs/geneva/official/poa.html

5. The succinct observations in this paragraph were made by David Souter, and his contribution to the concept note and in this introduction are used verbatim with permission.
6. See Gillwald's report in this edition of GISWatch.
7. APC & CRIS. (2003) *Involving civil society in ICT policy: The World Summit on the Information Society.* https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/InvolvingCivilSociety_EN.pdf
8. Finlay, A. (2013). *Communication rights ten years after the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS): Civil society perceptions.* APC. https://www.giswatch.org/sites/default/files/apc_surveywsis_en-2013.pdf

WACC contributed to the ongoing debate about digital justice by revisiting "communication rights".

It is often argued that the term and the related concepts of the right to communicate and to communication are vague, difficult to translate into law, and in any case already covered by freedom of opinion and expression.

WACC invited 14 communication rights advocates to explore what the terms mean for them. The outcome - "Weaving Communication in Solidarity", *Media Development* 2/2024, - unpacked different understandings of the term, calling for a rights-based approach to regardless of the language used.

"We must resist by every means possible the steady erosion of democratic values, press freedom, and people's capacity to see, hear, and express their needs and concerns in public without obstruction."

Media Development 2/2024 can be found here.

Oberhausen (Germany) 2024

At the International Short Film Festival Oberhausen 2024, two ecumenical juries appointed by INTERFILM and SIGNIS were accredited for the International Competition and the International Children's and Youth Film Competition. The Prize in the International Competition was endowed with € 2,000 and the prize in the Children's and Youth Film Competition with € 1,500. Half the prize money was donated by the Protestant Church District of Oberhausen, and the other half by Katholische Filmarbeit in Germany.

The Ecumenical Jury of the International Competition awarded its Prize to *O ma* (Before then) directed by Xue Mengzhu (Germany, China, 2023).

Motivation: Language can be a barrier: We don't know the other person's language or can't understand what they want to tell us. Language can also be liberating: finally expressing what is on my mind, revealing myself and sharing my inner feelings. But can language be both a barrier and a liberation? Yes, this paradox is possible. Our winning film this year proves it.

By dissolving the traditional categories of speaker and listener, it is also possible to express what cannot be said. A letter in a foreign language becomes a possibility of communication that remains misunderstood, and at the same time the unspeakable is said and no longer hidden.

The film is about our relationship with the people we love, the people we don't want to let go, and the people we want open up to. But it also shows how the gap between different generations, social systems and places can prevent us from fully understanding each other. It shows us a creative way of dealing with the unspeakable

and is a plea for an intense relationship between us and our neighbours.

In addition, the jury awarded a Commendation to *Hitbasrut* (Decryption) directed by Maya Zack (Israel, 2023).

Motivation: Memories fade – this experience is part of being human. We would give a lot to be able to go back in time for a moment and refresh our memories of people we care about. One film in this year's competition brings this to the screen in a unique, tactile way. Based on a personal story, the film uses intense scenes to explore a universal human theme. We read it as an opportunity to dive deeper into the existential questions about the other within the self, about the materiality and conditions of memory. The Ecumenical Jury of the Children's and Youth Film Competition awarded its Prize to *The Old Young Crow* directed by Liam LoPinto (Japan, USA, 2023).

Motivation: In this film, an elderly man reminisces about a childhood experience of solitude in a new location while reading his old sketchbook. His drawings transport him back to a significant moment in a quiet graveyard, where he found solace and encountered an older woman grieving her son's loss. This film employs innov-ative animation techniques alongside live action, weaving a heartfelt narrative about a spiritually sensitive boy adapting to new religious customs. Through connecting with the deceased and reconciling his own losses, he discovers a sense of belonging in his unfamiliar surroundings.

The members of the 2024 Jury in the International Competition were: Alexandra Palkowitsch, Germany/Austria; Phil Rieger, Germany (President of the Jury); Krisztián Tajti, Hungary.

The members of the 2024 Jury of the Children's and Youth Film Competition were: Franciska Hortoványi, Hungary; Theresia Merz, Austria (President of the Jury); Johan H. Roeland, The Netherlands.

Cannes (France) 2024

At the 77th Cannes Film Festival (14-25 May 2024), the Ecumenical Jury, appointed by INTERFILM and SIGNIS, awarded its Prize to *The Seeds of the Sacred Fig* (still below) directed by Mohammad Rasoulof (Germany, France, Iran, 2024).

Motivation: When religion is associated with political power and patriarchy, it can destroy

the most intimate relationships and the dignity of individuals, as this Iranian family drama embodies. The jury was impressed by the film's rich symbolism, its generous and hopeful ending, its touches of humour and its heartbreaking tension. The subtlety and sobriety of its writing, both dramatic and filmic, make it a metaphor for any authoritarian theocracy.

Furthermore, to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Ecumenical Jury in Cannes, the Jury awarded a Special Prize to the German filmmaker and playwright Wim Wenders to honour his work.

Members of the 2024 Jury: Alexander Bothe (Germany); Johanna Haberer (Germany); Edgar Octavio Rubio Hernandez (Mexico); Pierre Alain Lods (France); Julienne Munyaneza (Jury President, Rwanda/United Kingdom); Magali van Reeth (France).

Transilvania International Film Festival (Romania) 2024

The Ecumenical Jury Prize at the 23rd edition of the Transilvania International Film Festival (14-23 June 2024), worth 1,000 euros, offered by SIGNIS and INTERFILM went to *Zomervacht / Summar Brother* directed by Joren Molter (Netherlands).

Motivation: With an emotional and genuine portrayal by the main character, this film weaves a multi-layered social-realist narrative. Its cinematography, perpetually reflecting the underlying conflict, guides us through a journey from ignorance to love, from fear to hope, and from irresponsibility to a profound care for others. The film reminds us that the "other" is always by our side.

The Ecumenical Jury also awarded a Special Mention to: *Unde Merg Elefantii / Where Elephants Go* directed by Gabi Virginia Șarga and Cătălin Rotaru (Romania).

Motivation: In this brave cinematic me-

ta-fairy-tale, the essential details and necessary nuances that we otherwise ignore in everyday life are seen more clearly. Attentive and open to the unpredictable, we are invited to be aware of the traces we leave in the lives of others and to enjoy the present.

Members of the TIFF Ecumenical Jury 2024: Ileana Bîrsan (Romania); Piet Halma (Netherlands); Tímea Kókai-Nagy (Hungary); Edgar Rubio (Mexico).

Karlovy Vary (Czech Republic) 2024

At the 58th Karlovy Vary International Film Festival (June 28 – July 6, 2024), the Ecumenical Jury, appointed by INTERFILM and SIGNIS, awarded its Prize to *Elskling (Loveable)* directed by Lilja Ingolfsdottir (Norway, 2024).

Motivation: This debut film explores a family drama from the female perspective. The protagonist faces a severe crisis in her marriage. Initially, she blames her husband, but through a difficult and painful process of self-reflection, she gradually acknowledges her own significant responsibility in the situation. This acceptance paves the way for both her and her husband to make a fresh start.

In addition, the jury awarded a Commendation to *Panoptikoni (Panopticon)* directed by George Sikharulidze (Georgia, France, Italy, Romania, 2024).

Motivation: In this compelling coming-of-age tale, a young teenager grapples with the indifference of his parents, who are preoccupied with their own projects in life. Left to navigate the tumultuous journey to adulthood alone, he has to overcome life's challenges. His quest for identity and purpose is further muddled by the complexities of a misunderstood and misapplied religiosity, adding layers of conflict and introspection to his path.

Members of the 2024 Jury: Barbora Cihelková (Czech Republic); Guido Convents (Belgium); Viktor Kókai-Nagy (Hungary). ∎