

Media Development

4/2024

WACC

A Global Vision of Digital Justice



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

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80 Hayden Street, Toronto
Ontario M4Y 3G2
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100 Church Road
Teddington TW11 8QE
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Editor: Philip Lee

Assistant Editor: Lorenzo Vargas

Editorial Consultants

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

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- 4 Editorial
- 6 **An Invitation to Consider a Progressive and Decolonial Civil Society Agenda for WSIS+20**
Clemencia Rodriguez (Colombia/USA),
Seán Ó Siochrú (Ireland), Parminder
Jeet Singh (India)
- 18 **The Global Digital Compact – an “add and stir gender” déjà vu?**
Anita Gurumurthy and Nandini Chami
- 19 **Victims as heroes or villains: Double standards in covering two contemporary conflicts**
Daya Thussu
- 24 **Unearned prestige: How *The Economist* covers the war in Ukraine**
Robert Hackett,
with Farrukh Chishtie
- 31 **Why Al Jazeera’s news coverage of Israel’s war on Gaza has gained global credibility**
Kiran Hassan
- 36 On the screen

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

The 1/2025 issue of *Media Development* will look at the intersection of communication rights and climate justice. How can community media and digital technologies help to inform the debate?



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actalliance

At the beginning of 2024, *Media Development* took the theme [Towards Democratic Governance of Digital Society](#). Its editorial claimed that a digital era that is genuinely democratic depends on “Societies in which everyone can freely create, access, utilise, share and disseminate information and knowledge, so that individuals, communities and peoples are empowered to improve their quality of life and to achieve their full potential.” Such a vision is not new, and in fact these very words go back two decades to the [WSIS Civil Society Declaration of 2003](#).

In September 2024, the UN’s much-heralded “Summit of the Future” endorsed its Pact for the Future and two annexes: the Global Digital Compact, dealing with closing digital divides and regulating artificial intelligence (AI), and the Declaration on Future Generations, calling for national and international decision-making to focus on ensuring peaceful, inclusive, and just societies.

The Pact for the Future pledged “to ensure that the United Nations and other key multilateral institutions can deliver a better future for people and planet, enabling us to fulfil our existing commitments while rising to new and emerging challenges and opportunities.”

It underlined that, “efforts to redress injustice and to reduce inequalities within and between countries to build peaceful, just and inclusive societies cannot succeed unless we step up our efforts to promote tolerance, embrace diversity and combat all forms of discrimination, including racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance and all their abhorrent and contemporary forms and manifestations.”

The Pact also reaffirmed “our commitment to the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, to accelerating our efforts to achieve gender equality, women’s participation and the empowerment of all women and girls in all domains and to eliminating all forms of

discrimination and violence against women and girls.”

However, as *Al Jazeera* pointed out ([24 September 2024](#)), “As is often the case with UN resolutions and pledges, the Pact for the Future is packed with lofty goals and commitments but is thin on actual, realistic steps that the body can take to implement its own vision.”

While the relevance of digital technologies was stressed (the subject of the Global Digital Compact), communication rights, independent media, and information integrity were largely conspicuous by their absence from the 56-page document. Media are referred to in the context of protecting journalists in conflict situations, but otherwise it was as if media ecologies had no political, economic or social impact.

The Global Digital Compact itself has the following objectives:

- * Close all digital divides and accelerate progress across the Sustainable Development Goals.
- * Expand inclusion in and benefits from the digital economy for all.
- * Foster an inclusive, open, safe and secure digital space that respects, protects and promote human rights.
- * Advance responsible, equitable and interoperable data governance approaches.
- * Enhance international governance of artificial intelligence for the benefit of humanity.

Significant revisions to the text by some countries led to a watered down final version of what is an “Annex” to the Pact for the Future. Anita Gurumurthy and Nandini Chami identify some of the gender disparities in their piece in this issue of *Media Development*. And civil society organisations are now planning to intervene at the UN World Summit on the Information Society+20 High-Level Event, 7-11 July 2025 in Geneva, as the global forum for influencing future actions.

It is difficult to underestimate the significance of both Summits for democratic freedoms worldwide. Civil society expectations of positive intentions, outcomes, and actions

are running high. For most, they constitute “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 ... 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.”¹

And yet there is confusion. What is all the fuss about? What are communication rights? What are *digital* communication rights? How do they differ from non-digital communication rights? The issues are complex, multidimensional, and vary widely according to local communication ecosystems, infrastructures, regulatory practices, and governance regimes.

Many international, regional, and national organisations spent months working to clarify the issues at stake and to secure a place for civil society’s views and demands in both the UN’s Pact for the Future and its Global Digital Compact. Such is the complexity that WACC commissioned a background paper – published here – providing context as well as setting out ways to create “an environment of critical, competent, and creative interaction among individuals, as well as among diverse communities, cultures, ethnic groups, and nationalities, fostering peace and mutual understanding.”

The authors define “a holistic vision for a progressive digital society, encompassing basic, normative principles, on issues like ownership of platforms, data, and AI, and community-centric and owned digital platforms and structures.”

TRUST IN MEDIA

At the heart of the Pact for the Future and its Global Digital Compact lies trust. Can people have faith in the systems that underlie global governance, digital connectivity, big data, and the governments and agencies whose task it is to

regulate them fairly and transparently?

Intimately related to the issue of trust in the media is the use of digital technologies in news gathering and publishing, and especially independent media as sources of accurate and reliable information. In this respect, three articles in this issue of *Media Development* explore media coverage of conflict and the notion that respected Western media outlets must be unbiased simply because of their liberal stance and democratic track record.

In his article, Daya Thussu identifies “the double standards shown by US-dominated Western news organizations in covering conflict situations where vital geopolitical and economic interests are involved and how professional standards of journalism are subservient to relaying an acceptable narrative.”

In their article, Robert A. Hackett and Farrukh Chishtie analyse coverage of the war in Ukraine by *The Economist* to argue in favour of “more comprehensive analyses of conflict from diverse perspectives” and against inherent “ideological and geo-cultural biases”. And Kiran Hassan notes the transformation of Al Jazeera “from a news network ‘for and by the Arabs’ into a global news network attracting credibility and trust.”

Public debate around the World Summit on the Information Society+20 process has emphasised the nexus between digital technologies, AI, and trust in the news. In the public mind, transparency and ethical standards rank high and, as underlined in the paper by Clemencia Rodriguez et al, “democratic and inclusive regulatory frameworks must be designed to govern our media, digital platforms, data, and AI... at global, regional, and national levels.” Without such frameworks, we shall be back to square one. ■

Note

1. [WSIS+20: Reimagining horizons of dignity, equity and justice for our digital future](#). Global Information Watch 2024 Special Edition, Introduction, p.8. Association for Progressive Communications (APC); IT for Change, WACC Global, and Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA).

An Invitation to Consider a Progressive and Decolonial Civil Society Agenda for WSIS+20

Clemencia Rodriguez (Colombia/USA), Seán Ó Siochrú (Ireland), Parminder Jeet Singh (India)

The fictional portrait below of Nelly and her family living in a media and digital world is based on research conducted by the authors as well as secondary sources. The reality of the struggle for control of our media and communication ecosystem is genuine.

Although it sits just 87 kilometres from the country's capital city of Bogotá, the roads in the rural area known as Santa Teresa are impassable these days due to strong rains and the ruts created by heavy trucks that carry chickens for the local poultry agribusiness. In the morning, Nelly checks her neighbourhood's WhatsApp chat to see what people are saying about the road. Is it open? Will she be able to get to work on her motorcycle? As she drinks a quick coffee and eats a flax bun, she checks her banking app – Yes! Her employer has deposited her pay for last week. She has a bit of money to spend. Her cell phone is connected to her home's Wi-Fi, which costs the family €18/month.¹ She goes online to *Mercadolibre*² to check the price of some pretty sandals she saw last week. She may also have enough to purchase a couple of parts she needs for her motorcycle.

Offscreen, each platform is collecting Nelly's data. Data about everything she feels,

thinks, does, and desires is automatically collected, organised, analysed, and curated to sell to the highest bidder. By the time Nelly's family begins to wake up, various algorithms have collected data about her health, her finances, where she lives and works, how she travels to work, what she wants, and who she is. This will impact her future in ways she cannot see. Health insurance companies will know what risks she might pose to them; banks will know if it's a good idea to approve her loan applications; motor vehicle insurance companies will know if she is a good driver and if her motorcycle is in good condition. Most platforms and algorithms Nelly used were designed by people very different from her: upper-middle-class, highly educated, English-speaking white males who were born and grew up in the Global North. Every platform and algorithm was designed with one primary goal: to make a profit.

Nelly's family consists of nine people – her spouse, children and stepchildren – living in a small rural home. The radio is on, bombarding everyone with football and cycling commentary, news, music, and the latest Colombian celebrity gossip. They have three television sets, and they pay €2.71/month for Netflix. At night the entire family is enthralled by *Rigo*, the latest locally produced *telenovela*, which is a biopic about Rigoberto Urrao, one of the best-known Colombian road racing cyclists. The storytelling in *Rigo* draws on the long history of Colombian television drama, which is based on local characters, ways of living, and landscapes. Rigid regulatory regimes and governance structures have protected the domestic television industry, allowing the Colombian *telenovela* to flourish. Artists, filmmakers, academics, and audiences have joined forces to make this genre a unique creature, rooted in local talent and uniquely Colombian storytelling styles and aesthetics. In 1999, when Nelly was 21, she and her mother Carmen enjoyed *Yo Soy Betty La Fea*, directed by the legendary Fernando Gaitán. In 1982, when Carmen was 25, she and her mother Ligia never missed an episode of *La Mala Hierba*, which was created by Martha Bossio.

In Nelly's home everyone – including the youngest child (age 11) – has a cell phone. Each time one of the children breaks their cell phone, the family must gather all their resources to replace it. The broken cell phone becomes junk and may end up as space garbage or in one of the landfills where 40 million tons of toxic e-waste are collected each year. Nelly's family's e-waste contributed to the 390 million kgs of e-waste that Colombia generated in 2022. Each human person produces seven kilograms of e-waste per year and, according to the United Nations, most of it is illegally dumped in poor countries. "Once in a landfill, these toxic materials seep out into the environment, contaminating land, water and the air. In addition, devices are often dismantled in primitive conditions. Those who work at these sites suffer frequent bouts of illness." Human communities living near landfills are exposed to mercury, lead, and arsenic. Some countries generate much more e-waste than others. An average European generates 17.6 kgs/year of e-waste, while an African generates 2.5 kg/year. While Ghana produced 72 million kgs of e-waste in 2022, the United States produced 7,200 million kgs.³

Much further south, 5,188 km from Nelly's house, lithium and copper are being mined to power the new cell phone Nelly's child needs to replace her broken one. Cell phones require copper, and lithium for their batteries. One of the places most disrupted by lithium mining is the exquisite Atacama Desert in northern Chile. Mining lithium requires enormous quantities of water, which is causing water shortages for 18 Indigenous communities in the region. Chile is the world's largest supplier of copper, which is extracted from open-cut mines. Mining copper, lithium, tellurium, and the other minerals needed to produce our e-technologies is causing all types of environmental, labour, and human rights disruptions in lands and communities far away from the places where the shiny gadgets are sold and used.

Nelly has many jobs. She cleans houses. She raises chickens and sells them when they are

fattened. She is an excellent cook, so she does a bit of catering for local events. Every weekday is different, and she moves around a lot. When she cannot connect to Wi-Fi she uses data from two SIM cards. Her limited budget means she can only afford a € 1.13 weekly data package that gives her unlimited minutes and a small amount of data. This means that, when she is on the move, her internet access is limited aside from WhatsApp, texts, and calls. She buys cell phone packages from Claro and Movistar, two wealthy transnational telecommunications corporations. In 2018, the Colombian government levied fines (€ 1,489,819) against Claro and Movistar for cheating its customers with internet speeds that were half of what customers were paying for.

Nelly's daughter, Nini, is 16 and finishing high school in the small nearby mountain town of Sasaima. A typical digital native, Nini spends significant time on her cell phone, chatting with friends and scrolling through Instagram and TikTok content. However, Nini has a different kind of relationship with media as well. Seven years ago, her elementary school teacher involved her entire class in a project with the local community radio station, one of the 774 community radio stations that, thanks to years of media activism, operate in the country. Nini remembers the first day she spoke on the microphone and heard her voice coming through her headphones. Even better, later that day, as she walked home from school, her neighbours congratulated her on being on the radio. To this day she cherishes the feeling – her voice reaching the public sphere, the challenge of figuring out what to say each time she's on the mic. She interviews local characters and government officials and listens to her co-producers, who are also her best friends.

Since she first participated in the community radio station with her class, Nini has continued to be an active youth radio producer. With seven years of experience in citizen journalism, she is familiar with the ins and outs of her community; she is critical of local government officials; she is an environmentalist and a feminist. In five years, she will join local chapters

of the abortion rights movement; she will also be an active participant in *glocal* movements defending the rights of rivers and creeks. In 2029, when she moves to Bogotá to attend public university, Nini will join [CanAirIO](#), a local citizen science initiative that monitors air quality in that city of 10 million people. The platform and algorithm used by CanAirIO were developed for public use and collective wellbeing, not for profit. They were designed in Colombia by Colombians: an example of design justice.⁴

Clearly, Ligia, Carmen, Nelly, and Nini have woven Western communication technologies into their lives. However, these are not the only types of technologies they use. Like most Colombians, they are mestizas, daughters of centuries of intermixing between Indigenous and European civilization.⁵ Their daily lives are deeply rooted in Indigenous knowledge and technologies. They know how to use local herbs, fruits, roots, and tubers as medicines. They are constantly reading the songs of birds or the appearance of specific insects as signs of weather patterns. On their small farms, they use various types of Indigenous agricultural technologies to grow gardens and raise poultry, pigs, and other animals. In their homes, certain objects maintain channels of communication between their families and natural, human, and spiritual entities. Various non-Western communication strategies permeate their everyday lives, from performative language forms that can make things happen, to the use of water, fire, and wind energies to send messages from one place to another – including places beyond the physical world – the only world recognized as legitimate and true by the Western mind.

THE STRUGGLE FOR CONTROL OF THE MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION ECOSYSTEM

Over the years, communication technologies have been at the centre of an ongoing debate. How should we manage them? Are media, communication, and digital technologies comparable to a bottle of beer or a pair of sneakers – mere products to be bought and sold in the market-

place? Many powerful entities, including media corporations (such as Disney, for example) and governments prioritising business interests (particularly the United States), have supported this view.

Yet the question becomes more complex when we consider the critical role that communication, media, and digital technologies play in everyday life. Democracy relies on accurate information and journalism; students need the internet and digital tools for their research; people require access to digital technologies and media to navigate health systems, find jobs, vote, and understand their world. Should free and open access to these resources be treated as commodities available only to those who can afford them? Or should they be considered as fundamental rights, akin to education, health, or food and water? Many governments, especially in the Global South, and civil society groups believe the answer must be yes, and so advocate for the concept of communication rights.

FIRST ROUND (1970 – 1985)

The first to sound the alarm in the 1970s were the newly liberated colonies, demanding changes to an economic order that discriminated against them. Parallel to patently unfair economic practices, ex-colonies became concerned with how print media, radio, television, and film were always about rich, white people in wealthy countries, their stories, issues, and worldviews. For example, when people in Accra, Ghana, watch television, go to the movies, or read newspapers or magazines, they are showered with a deluge of North American or European characters, stories, and issues. Yet people in London or Dallas rarely get to see anyone from Ghana in their news feed, or their entertainment media. The flow of media content and news is highly unequal between the Global South and the Global North. Against the “**free-flow**” of information agenda that rich countries and corporations defended so loudly, the Global South and its allies demanded a “**fair flow.**” Activism spiralled and grew against Northern control and ownership of all enabling

communication technologies, knowledge, and expertise, until a crisis exploded at a very international forum: UNESCO, the United Nations' organisation in charge of Education, Science, and Culture.

This late 1970s showdown was avoided by the creation of an *International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems*, generally called the MacBride Commission after its Chair, Seán MacBride. In 1980 the Commission presented its report – known since as *Many Voices One World* – to UNESCO's General Conference. To this day, this report is considered the first comprehensive and wide-ranging diagnosis of a very unequal communication and media global ecosystem. Although *Many Voices One World* bears the hallmarks of a fractious political process, fudging many issues and containing numerous caveats including a complete disregard for gender issues, it also was bold enough to demand a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO), that included concrete recommendations, such as:

“Communication needs in a democratic society should be met by the extension of specific rights such as the right to be informed, the right to inform, the right to privacy, the right to participate in public communication – all elements of a new concept, the right to communicate. In developing what might be called a new era of social rights, we suggest all the implications of the right to communicate be further explored.” (UNESCO 1980 Recommendation. 54, p 265)

For the first time those who believed that media and communication should be a common good had a general framework – NWICO, a detailed justification, a set of proposals, and a unifying concept: the *right to communicate*. The concept of communication rights (CRs), as it began to crystallise during the NWICO debates, pointed beyond the idea of “free-flow” of information towards a notion of “fair-flow”. It broadened a myopic vision that limited communication

to freedom of expression and embraced wider issues of economy, society and culture, including the ongoing colonial legacy, and new reality, of Southern countries.

The NWICO report was eventually endorsed by UNESCO's General Assembly, but the US and the UK threw a fit and withdrew from UNESCO, in 1984 and 1985 respectively. This first activist movement towards the right to communicate and a media and communication infrastructure that would address everyone's information and communication needs ended after a few years and UNESCO reverted to the free flow doctrine. But the issues did not go away – far from it.

SECOND ROUND (1990 – 2005)

In the latter half of the 1990s, the internet emerged as a new form of communication infrastructure, fundamentally different from analogue. Unlike radio and television, which are controlled by their producers, the internet is controlled by its users. This shift enabled a mode of communication that was decentralised and open to anyone. A new communication ecosystem began to take shape. Rumbblings of tectonic shifts could be heard everywhere, but this new digital communication universe was murky and unclear until the second decade of the millennium. Soon, a conflict arose between two opposing forces: the private sector, pushing for market dominance and profit, and civil society, advocating for access and rights.

In Europe and the US, the two opposing forces knew what was at stake: civil society saw the enormous potential of digital technologies as a source of cheap and near-infinite interactivity, social movements would be able to communicate seamlessly and effectively to multitudes, and for free; marginalised communities would be able to access health, education, and agricultural information via an internet open to all. The internet's liberatory and emancipatory potential became clear.

But corporate interests soon recognised the

potential of a singular digital backbone for seamless global communication. The major corporate powers closed ranks against any concerted opposition to their business model. Private sectors and neoliberal governments claimed that a business-centric internet would ultimately benefit all. UNDP and the World Bank joined the excitement and launched programmes centred on information and communication technologies for development (ICTD or ICT4D). Instead of finding how new digital technologies could be employed to empower communities and find local solutions to local problems, ICT4D applied a “business model” and “private sector-centric” approach to development in general. Instead of a new digital world of infinite and cheap interactivity for all, we were now to live in a world where everyone is watched all the time (surveillance); where algorithms discriminate and further marginalise; and where most digital platforms are designed by white, middle-class, English-speaking men with one goal in mind: to make a profit.

What followed was a war among opposing forces trying to steer the internet in different directions. Some, such as John Perry Barlow in his influential *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*, declared that the internet was a collective creation, accessible to all, where private property did not exist. Acting in a similar spirit, an army of activists spread around the planet, doing heroic selfless work, country to country, fought against telecom lobbies and their government supporters; they went into communities, national and international forums, and social movements insisting that the internet’s tremendous potential should be accessible to all; they also offered various regulatory approaches that could guarantee that the internet would not be entirely privatised.

During the same period, the private sector, supported by the US government, was steering the internet in the opposite direction. Between 1996 and 1998, the US Telecommunications Act, the Framework for Global Electronic Commerce, and the Digital Millennium Copyright Act established the private sector as the primary archi-

tect and controller of the internet. A key and deceptive move led by the North was to shift the nature of the negotiations. Claiming that information, data, and cultural products are nothing more than **tradable commodities**, they argued that global negotiations about how to regulate communication and media should not happen on the floors of the UN, or UNESCO, or any other multilateral system, but in trade and finance institutions such as the World Trade Organization (or what used to be the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade – GATT). Media and communication sectors – today known as Big Tech – continued to commercialise, consolidate and centralise globally, with rapid technological development driven almost entirely by Northern corporations.

Civil society and Southern governments with their vision of an emancipatory internet that would respond to people’s needs found that it was a no man’s land when it came to regulation. This new technology was allowed to flourish and to permeate every inch of our social life without any serious responsibilities or duties. The internet was virgin territory when it came to regulations. No one regulates the internet. Corporations, supported by the US government, move into this virgin territory, shaping the new communication ecosystem to suit their priorities. The internet was born in the US and as such, the US has always had tremendous power to control it. In its effort to shape it as a business platform, the US government positioned ICANN as the sole organisation in charge of the internet. ICANN – Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers – is a US non-profit run by renowned techies and private sector players.

The United Nations stepped in and proposed a summit to discuss this state of affairs: who should regulate the internet? What should internet regulation look like? The International Telecommunications Union – the UN agency responsible for information and communication technologies – convened the first World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), to be held in Geneva in 2003 and Tunis in 2005. UNESCO

has expressed an interest in convening it, but ultimately the summit was left to the ITU. This is important since UNESCO is the kind of UN agency that embraces political issues and North-South inequities, while the ITU is concerned only with the technical aspects of communication technologies. To prepare for the WSIS, civil society formed a coalition in 2001 called the Communication Rights in the Information Society campaign. Known as the CRIS Campaign, the coalition brought together a range of media and communication NGOs with the specific goal of organising for the WSIS.

The CRIS campaign and other coalitions managed to bring many elements of civil society into the WSIS, going beyond the media, freedom of expression and “techie” groups to include for instance community development, gender and indigenous groups. Civil society succeeded in articulating shared views and having them heard, though early hopes for participatory process innovations did **not materialise**. Yet its lobbying and **final statement** stopped well short of a coherent vision and governance system for the “information society” as it was then, let alone what was to emerge later as the digital era.

Instead of addressing the structural dynamics that were increasing inequity and imbalance in the digital world, civil society diluted its vision by focusing on the need to close the gap between the global North and South, in terms of ICT tools, capacities and infrastructure. The discussion veered into finding financial instruments that could close the gap – that eventually failed to materialise. In relation to governance, while affirming that the UN remains the most legitimate inter-governmental forum and noting the “shrinking global public policy spaces”, civil society offered no clear vision of how governance might be reshaped and democratised for the digital era – or indeed more narrowly for the Internet. This is, however, hardly surprising. At that point the sheer breadth and depth of the impact of the digital, across all domains and sectors, was barely coming into view, and even the Northern governments and global corporations were strug-

gling to envisage what the future might bring.

THIRD ROUND (2005 – 2024)

In the last twenty years, these structures and dynamics have concentrated communication power in ways that were unimaginable just two decades ago. Our current digital universe is contributing to the demise of public interest media and journalism, enabling disinformation on a mass scale, and facilitating the erosion of democracies around the world. After the WSIS, certain countries including Brazil, China, and India tried to continue a global discussion about internet governance. But the Internet Governance Forum was soon populated by Big Tech full-time employees in charge of sucking all politics out of the forum, steering discussions in a technical direction. Furthermore, in ten years China was to have its own imperialist digital machine, just like that of the US.

What we experience today is not merely a continuation of the media concentration trends of the last century. It is a new form of colonialism and for-profit exploitation centred on the notion of data or datum. Traditional colonialism began when Columbus got lost and arrived in America instead of India in 1492; it was centred on continuous land grabs that impacted most of the human and natural communities on the planet. Europeans declared that all the new territories in which they set foot were “idle” and for their taking. By the 1890s, most of the nations of the world were either a colony or a coloniser, and colonial capitalist exploitation still shapes the lives of millions. Instead of grabbing land like traditional colonialism, today’s new data colonialism centres on **grabbing data**. Everything about a human person – her body, thoughts, feelings, desires – becomes data. “Data is potentially as valuable as land, because it provides access to a priceless resource: the intimacy of our daily lives.”⁶

Why is data valuable? Because it creates something that is now called “intelligence”; when computed together, your data, plus my data, plus the data of thousands of people gives

the data owner enormous power to shape, manipulate, and steer human activities and social affairs in specific directions. This is the new communicative and informative power of our era. Whoever controls this power, can control societies, markets, and worldviews. In different international forums, such as the World Trade Organization and the UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD), Northern voices (led by the US) have tried to defend the free flow of data, while Southern governments insist that data is a valuable resource and should not be gifted to the private sector.

Mejías and Couldry articulated this view of Big Tech as a new incarnation of colonial capitalism; data colonialism is global, large-scale, and produces unprecedented levels of wealth. Traditional colonialism was rooted in the “4 Xs”: explore, expand, exploit, and exterminate. From Mejías and Couldry we learn that in today’s data colonialism, the 4 Xs have taken on new forms based on the need to: *explore* new aspects of our lives to datafy; *expand* ways to mine data from every aspect of our daily lives; develop algorithms designed specifically to *exploit* the data that has been extracted; and *exterminate* any alternative technologies, ways of life, and worldviews.

Activists across all sectors understand that it is in the DNA of corporations to constantly strive to colonise new areas of economic, social and cultural activity, commercialising and monetizing, transforming them into their own profit-driven image. They always encounter resistance, especially in spheres central to social, political and cultural life, as people and communities fight to protect the core public-interest features of their daily lives and public institutions. The struggle is ongoing, each side gaining an advantage at different times. The post WW2 period, for instance, created conditions in which many wealthier countries, following robust and organised public and workers’ pressure, built comprehensive public health systems, greatly expanded public education, achieved major public support for farming and agriculture, and won significant advances in workers’ rights. Newly

independent countries joined this fight and became front-line battlegrounds from the 1960s and 1970s, though by then the pendulum had begun to swing back.

The digital era, born in neo-liberalism and shaped by the late 1990s in the interests of the corporate sector, handed a new weapon set to corporations in this struggle. Initially, as we have seen, key struggles were about their potential to transform communication and media, but the early thrust towards democratisation was soon overwhelmed by the corporate determination to monetise the benefits of these new tools. Corporations, driven by private equity’s burgeoning coffers, then targeted low-hanging fruit, com-

Recent issues of *Media Development*

3/2024 Communication in Conflict Situations

2/2024 Weaving Communication in Solidarity

1/2024 Towards Democratic Governance of Digital Society

4/2023 Migrant Rights are Human Rights

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mercial sectors such as taxis, retail services, and tourist accommodation, upending their structures and dynamics. Workers' rights were often the first casualty and trade unions have fought a long and hard battle in many sectors and continue to do so with some success. As the manipulation of huge volumes of data emerged as the new value-generating engine, platform corporations became more ambitious, moving into more challenging sectors, including especially public services.

Education and health have, as basic human needs, always been either publicly delivered or shaped by public regulation and governance, and they became key targets. COVID led to a new emphasis on online delivery for education, over infrastructure already privately controlled and often recycling largely generic Northern-oriented content. The health sector is being reshaped by back-office processing and data-based AI, delivered and controlled by digital platforms such as Meta, Apple, and Microsoft that take every opportunity to extract and monetize patients' data. Data is also now being extracted at every step in the agriculture, food processing and sales value-chain by major corporations intent on incrementally gaining control of the sector; and public agri-extension services replaced digital agri start-ups.

FOURTH ROUND (2024 – 20xx)

Global civil society groups working in areas of food and agriculture, health and biodiversity have been raising digital developments in the respective UN forums in recent years. In the US and EU, movements and legal developments are being driven by civil society groups against Big Tech. With the emergence of AI as potentially an even more transformative force than the internet, and with grave concerns about the risk alongside awe about its possibilities and power, views about the need for regulation and policy have again undergone a big shift. For the first time, industry leaders – even from inside the US – are calling for regulation of AI, and the digital in general, including at the global level.

There are also emerging progressive practices on the ground. Platform cooperativism, for instance, promotes common ownership of platforms by small business entities which use them, and examples include Uber-like cooperative platforms for taxis and restaurants, and for small service jobs. Some governments are attempting to regain control of the digital sphere. In Brazil and India, the central digital payments platform is public – Pix and UPI respectively; and the Indian government is promoting a public e-commerce platform named ONDC (Open Network Digital Commerce), as an alternative to Amazon and such online shopping platforms. These kinds of community and public alternatives to commercial platforms are promising developments.

Nevertheless, these initiatives, in advocacy and practices, are scattered and siloed. None posits, or indeed claims to posit, a holistic vision for a *progressive digital society*, encompassing basic, normative principles, on issues like ownership of platforms, data, and AI, and community-centric and owned digital platforms and structures. Yet such a vision is essential to bring about coherent, collectively driven progressive change.

The digital sector still lacks accountable governance and public interest regulation at the global level. No single instrument or agency of the United Nations has the scope or authority to take a holistic view of the sector, and attempts at the WSIS+10 in 2015 to develop a multi-lateral “enhanced cooperation” mechanism (as had been mandated at the WSIS) fell apart despite efforts of many countries in the Global South. In the context of the 2024 UN Summit of the Future, the UN General Secretary unveiled a new initiative called the Global Digital Compact – a proposal clearly shaped and trimmed by digital corporations and their government supporters to ensure that no significant constraints would be imposed on their control of the digital world. Civil society is making concerted efforts to have a voice in these discussions, efforts that even if they meet limited success in the short term, are helping to build a wider, cross-sectoral [coalition for the future](#), cross-fertilising across many themes.

GUIDING CONCEPTS AND PRINCIPLES

One of the few conceptual frameworks to consistently inform this struggle is that of Communication Rights (CRs). This extends freedom of expression in several directions. If freedom of expression only defends the rights of a speaker, CRs include the right to be heard, listened to and understood, and responded to. CRs encompasses the entire communication cycle, not just the moment of uttering an expression. Moreover, CRs are not centred on the individual, as they necessarily implicate the collective and social element of human communication. A wider range of human rights is thus essential to operationalising CRs; “enabling” or ‘flanking’ rights that include rights to participate in one’s culture, of ethnic and linguistic minorities, to peaceful assembly and association, and to the fruits of economic efforts. Together, the communication component of each can become larger than the sum of the parts, nurturing a climate of mutual respect and tolerance between diverse communities and cultures. Communication rights, as a concept, is thus well suited to the current juncture in the digital era.

First, the concept bridges the chasm between *negative* rights (where the duty-bearer must *refrain* from doing something), such as freedom of expression, and *positive* rights (where the duty-bearer must do something to enable the right), such as media related rights. Perhaps nowhere is the contrast, in advocacy, between negative and positive rights as clear as in the digital arena. A very significant digital rights community considers that digital rights encompass only freedom of expression and protection of privacy; while articulation and advocacy of social, economic and cultural rights in the digital arena is extremely weak. Recalling the role of communication rights in an earlier era of communication and information processes, well developed theoretical and practical frameworks are essential to establishing the *indivisibility of rights* in the digital arena i.e. that human rights should *reinforce* each other.

Second, communication rights embrace collective rights, not just those of the individual.

Communication rights reaffirm the diversity of communication forms and content, whether they be languages, ethnicities, gender, community, or other. Communication rights are conceived not just as individual, but as collective. Again, few spheres suffer as much from individualisation of rights discourse as the digital sector, which fails to articulate the diversity of communication among collectives.

Finally, the communication rights movement focuses on structures and institutions – their design, ownership, and governance, an approach needed for the digital arena. CRs can be realised only with appropriate social structures and institutions, and the concept must inform their very design. In the case of digital society, there is an added advantage that we are still in its formative stage, and if done well, its structures can still considerably be influenced in progressive directions.

Ultimately, achieving CRs demands a democratisation of all communication structures – analogue, digital, AI-based, which in governance terms means bottom-up control of information and communication generation and dissemination (recalling the early hopes of the Internet) in the public interest – which in turn can inform strategic action from local to global level.

POSTSCRIPT: ANOTHER DIGITAL FUTURE IS POSSIBLE

Nelly, her daughter Nini, and every person on the planet should have access to communication resources that support and nourish meaningful and fulfilling lives. Applying a Communication Rights (CRs) framework to the lives of Nelly and Nini means they have the right to live in an environment where they can freely express their thoughts, ideas, opinions, dreams, and life stories, and ensure their voices are heard and taken seriously as part of a public conversation. Dialogue and collective interaction are crucial to CRs, so platforms like TikTok, Instagram, X, or Facebook, which prioritise one-to-many communication and increase engagement through endless scrolling, do not foster CRs.

Nelly and Nini have the right to their own media and digital platforms to nurture their own voice and speak the world on their own terms and in their own languages. They also have the right to receive the necessary training to use communication platforms creatively, allowing them to express their worldviews. Nelly and Nini's CRs will be respected only when their expressions can engage in dialogue with others.

Communication Rights are layered, like an onion. Recently, Nelly has been concerned about the falling price of chicken in the market, which negatively impacts her family's income. If the trend continues, she will struggle to feed her family. CRs mean that Nelly has the right to access relevant information about free trade agreements and other global and national policies that affect the price of chicken in Colombia and, ultimately, her life. CRs also ensure Nelly's right to receive this information in a language she can understand. Indigenous chicken farmers have the right to access platforms and information in their non-Western languages, and disabled people have the right to platforms designed to accommodate their disabilities.

Nelly is entitled to connect with other agricultural communities in Malaysia or Ecuador who are also feeling the negative impact of free trade agreements. Freedom of assembly is a right that complements CRs. If Nelly decides to join a national movement against the Colombian government signing new free trade agreements, she has the right to privacy. Her data – related to her involvement in the movement and all other personal information – should remain private and under her control.

While Nelly worries about the price of chicken, Nini and her friends have formed a band called *Sumercé*, which fuses hip-hop with ancestral Indigenous instruments and sounds. A CR framework would value, promote, and protect *Sumercé's* right to participate in and preserve their own culture and language, including those of ethnic, religious, or linguistic minorities. As a cultural expression, *Sumercé* would also be safeguarded as a means to counter the dominance of

a single language or culture. The ultimate goal of CRs is to guarantee an environment of critical, competent, and creative interaction among individuals, as well as among diverse communities, cultures, ethnic groups, and nationalities, fostering peace and mutual understanding.

To achieve this, the development of digital platforms and other communication technologies must involve designers who reflect the complexity and diversity of human experiences, languages, and worldviews. At local, national, and international levels, there should be a greater space for community-owned media, digital platforms, and communication initiatives. Market-driven media cannot address the communication and information needs of all human communities. Indigenous and First Nations peoples require their own autonomous communication and digital infrastructures for self-determination, local decision-making, and nurturing local expression and storytelling. Similarly, differently abled communities need their own communication technologies. CRs are not merely about "freedom of expression"; they are about listening, exchanging ideas, and mutual response at their core.

In addition to supporting non-profit media, inclusive and robust regulatory structures must be established to control the growing predatory datafication industries. Just as national communication policies of the 1970s regulated media flows and protected national media industries, and the regulations of the 1990s promoted community radio and television, we now need new regulatory frameworks. Regulatory structures and governance frameworks can ensure that not all our planetary communication resources are swallowed by profit-obsessed forces, monopolies, and consumerism.

Effective communication regulations governing analogue, digital, and AI-based technologies, can create environments where privacy, creativity, safety, and dignity are protected. They can guarantee data sovereignty and governance, encourage diversity in cultural forms and expressions, and impose environmentally sustainable

production and disposal of communication technologies. This comprehensive approach is known as Communication Rights.

A CALL TO ACTION

A key opportunity is on the immediate horizon. The global political stage of WSIS+20 offers in 2025 a rare opportunity to develop a **global progressive digital vision and movement** and to stake its claim to influence political decisions. Such an opportunity may not come again for a long time. The vision we create must be structural and holistic, addressing all aspects of the digital landscape – media, digital platforms, data, and AI – as well as their governance, architecture, design, and applications. It's essential that all sectors are involved, working alongside digital specialists and progressive techies. This emerging vision should be ambitious, anticipating future developments over decades, while also being specific enough to directly address current issues, such as the need for a new UN institution dedicated to Communication Rights and digital matters.

We invite progressive civil to engage in a full-scale consultative exercise to develop an extensive normative framework for the digital society. To kick off the conversation we offer this tentative list of *non-negotiables*, in which everyone's participation is key:

- * All people have the right to affordably access media, digital platforms, and AI, to receive and produce communication content, to express themselves freely, and to receive the training needed to use effectively all tools of human communication and interaction.
- * A media sector regulated in the public interest must include public service, civil society (community) and private sector media, and must not be dominated by big tech and markets alone.
- * Media, computing, digital platforms, data, and AI must be made available as public utilities, and cannot be regarded solely or primarily as commodities.
- * The design and content of our media, digital platforms, data, and AI must mirror the complexity of human experience. Protective discrimination and affirmative action initiatives are essential to maintain cultural and linguistic diversity and to guarantee the active participation of communities of colour, gender minorities, LGBTIQ communities, disabled communities, and communities in the Global South.
- * Regulation of digital platforms and social media must mandate interoperability – meaning that users can easily design each interface; select what content they want to receive and share; and swap information and data seamlessly between different platforms.
- * Data subjects, individually and collectively, must own their data. Media and digital regulation need to protect users from state and/or corporate surveillance, and data extraction for control or marketing purposes. Useful application of data must be fair and equitable, and under the control of the respective individual/collective data subjects.
- * Democratic and inclusive regulatory frameworks must be designed to govern our media, digital platforms, data, and AI. We need to develop new global, regional, and national level institutions responsible for governance of media, platforms, data, and AI.
- * Regulatory frameworks must address the predisposition of digital and AI to homogenize societies and centralize power; to engage in digital colonization; to shape new social hierarchies; and to erase distinctions between human and machine. Law and regulation must promote diversity and decentralization, and guarantee the digital sovereignty of every individual, community, and nation.
- * Since AI is constituted largely of data produced by people, it should be owned, controlled, and managed by people. Such ownership, control and governance of AI should be democratic, adequately distributed, and bottom-up.
- * AI-based interactions, artifacts and prod-

ucts must always be clearly distinguishable from human ones. In all key social, economic, cultural, and political interactions, everyone should have the right to access by means of human interactions rather than be presented only with AI options.

- * Such is the overpowering force of “datafication” and AI, and often its de-humanising impact, that all societies, groups and communities should be able to identify and calibrate which aspects of their social and individual lives and systems they want to be the subject of data and AI, and to what extent. Retraction on decisions made earlier should also be possible. These possibilities need to be integrated into the very design of digital technologies, and their governance at various levels. ■

Notes

1. The family pays €18/month to Evernet. Their internet package includes television and internet. They can access 70 television channels. The family also pays €2.71/month for Netflix.
2. Mercadolibre is the most popular e-commerce platform in Latin America. It is owned by Argentinean billionaire Marcos Galperin. Galperin is considered the wealthiest person in Argentina.
3. “A record 62 million tonnes (Mt) of e-waste was produced in 2022, up 82% from 2010. E-waste, any discarded product with a plug or battery, is a health and environmental hazard, containing toxic additives or hazardous substances such as mercury, which can damage the human brain and coordination system. For a full report see: https://ewastemonitor.info/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/GEM_2024_18-03_web_page_per_page_web.pdf

Also see: “We generate around 40 million tons of electronic waste every year, worldwide. That’s like throwing 800 laptops every second. An average cellphone user replaces their unit once every 18 months. E-waste comprises 70% of our overall toxic waste. Only 12.5% of E-Waste is recycled. 85% of our E-Waste are sent to landfills and incinerators are mostly burned, and release harmful toxins in the air! Electronics contain lead which can damage our central nervous system and kidneys. A child’s mental development can be affected by low level exposure to lead. The most common hazardous electronic items include LCD desktop monitors, LCD televisions, Plasma Televisions, TVs and computers with Cathode Ray Tubes. E-waste contains hundreds of substances, of which many are toxic. This includes mercury, lead, arsenic, cadmium, selenium, chromium, and flame retardants. 80% of E-Waste in the US and most of other countries are transported to Asia. 300 million computers and 1 billion cellphones go into production annually. It is expected to grow by 8% per year” <https://www.theworldcounts.com/stories/electronic-waste-facts>.

4. “Members of the CanAirIO community describe their initiative as a CS project that builds an air quality–monitoring network with DIY low-cost open-source sensors. They aim for popular adoption of sensing technology, so they run workshops, produce open documentation and manuals, and give online support for people interested in building sensors and joining the network. Since 2017, the community has gathered a heterogeneous set of actors (approximately 50 people) and interests: open data/software/hardware technologists/hackers, environmental activists, human rights activists, academics, and citizens affected by air pollution who all volunteer work to a self-financed endeavor” ([Barreneche and Lombana-Bermudez International Journal of Communication 17\(2023\)](#))
5. Many Colombians also have strong roots in African civilizations, but not in this mountain region.
6. Mejias, U and Couldry, N. (2024) *Data Grab. The New Colonialism of Big Tech and How to Fight Back*. University of Chicago Press.

Clemencia Rodríguez is a Professor at Temple University where she directs the [Master of Science in Communication for Development and Social Change](#) program. Her research centers on media and storytelling as forms of political agency in the Global South. Recently, she has explored media through the perspective of epistemologies of the South and decoloniality. She teaches in the areas of communication for social change, media in social movements, community/citizens’/radical media, and communication for peacebuilding.

Seán Ó Siochrú is a writer, activist and (professionally) a researcher and evaluator, involved in media and communication rights for over 35 years. He has written and edited many books; founded and Chaired Dublin Community Television in his native Ireland; and has evaluated numerous UN major programmes and those of numerous international and national NGOs. He is founder and Research Director with Nexus Research Cooperative.

Parminder is a digital society researcher and activist. Till recently he was an Executive Director of IT for Change, an Indian NGO in Special Consultative Status with the UN. Parminder has been a Special Advisor to the UN Internet Governance Forum and to the UN Global Alliance on ICTs for Development. He was a member of the UN’s Working Group on Improvements to the Internet Governance Forum, and of the UN’s Working Group on international Internet-related policies.

The Global Digital Compact – an “add and stir gender” déjà vu?

Anita Gurumurthy and Nandini Chami

The Global Digital Compact upholds “gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls and their full, equal and meaningful participation” as a core principle for digital cooperation [para 8(d)]. The extraordinary complexity of our times, which the digital phenomenon has only intensified, requires us to unpack this aspirational goal by looking more closely at the nuts and bolts of the Compact. In a world of stark inequalities, gender justice is often about locating the lost intersections, the invisible oppressions that tend to slip through policy formalise.

The Compact’s section-specific references to gender echo demands that feminist digital rights activists have been making for more than 20 years. These are important references to structural and systematic barriers that impede meaningful, safe, and affordable connectivity for all women and girls [para 11(g)], targeted digital capacity-building for women and girls [para 13(c)], and furthering women’s and girls’ inclusion in STEM education and research [para 13(h)]. Similarly, there is a recognition of “gender data divides”, in the section on data exchanges and standards [para 40] and an exhortation to promote “women’s entrepreneurship” through MSMEs and digital start-ups [para 21(i)].

The language and analysis strike the right chord, wrapped neatly in gender wokeness char-

acteristic of “check-box” politics that we are all familiar with today.

Yet, the vision and path for feminist digital justice – the structural and systemic conditions for a better digital paradigm, one that can allow women and girls (and indeed non-binary people that the text ignores) to become agentic actors in the digital society and economy – are not really evident in the rest of the text. The Compact cannot potentially pivot gender justice unless its vectors of transformation – commitments that work to eliminate inequality – are discernible.

The GDC’s status quoism leaves the injustices of the digital economy intact. While early drafts did hint at possible financing commitments for digital infrastructural finance, the Compact finally relies only on failed market mechanisms in this regard. This means the public right to access (the benefits of technology) and voice (in the tech paradigm), sadly, remains unavailable to the most marginalised women. The rights of women labouring in global AI value chains falls back on appeals to corporate responsibility – a route that has so far yielded no guarantees for the rights of workers and producers in the South routinely exploited in the platform economy.

Text to “counter and address all forms of violence, including sexual and gender-based violence” [para 30] evades corresponding reference to obligations and liabilities of powerful entities who profiteer from the unbridled circulation of misogynistic content in the algorithmic environments they engineer. The section on information integrity [paras 33 to 35] adopts a noticeably innocent tone – calling upon companies for “transparency” to enable users to provide “informed consent” in a digital services economy that is evidently dominated by a handful of powerful firms that render real choice a farce.

The Compact’s dissonance between its ideals and actions results in a serious blind spot; gender justice and human rights are decoupled from their normative foundations in global justice. Its conception of human rights -- which focuses on user protection in the lifecycle of digital technologies [para 22] – overlooks the digital structures perpetuating deeply gendered and op-

pressive arrangements.

The dots that trace back the (de)generative AI economy of knowledge enclosures, human precarity and loss of social autonomy to gendered origins remain invisible. What this obscures is the political economy of rare earth mining, e-commerce logistics, remote farming etc., that disenfranchises women from the South, erasing their productive and reproductive labour that digital capitalism feeds on.

The Global Digital Compact seems yet another instance of the empty policy motions of “gender mainstreaming” that only [streams gender away](#). Where do we go from here? As the DAWN-IT for Change Working Group’s [Declaration on Feminist Digital Justice](#) (2023) asserts – “We must claim the values of a new sociality that can repoliticize data, resignify intelligence and recreate digital architectures in a networked co-existence of planetary flourishing.” We must work with a normative compass that retains the ever-evolving political edge of feminism, even as we engage with self-reflexivity in the technicalised protocols of policy making.

The WSIS+20 review could be a space to introduce an action line for gender justice. The upcoming Beijing +30 review process is another occasion to galvanize actions for substantive equality in the data and AI epoch. The Compact is a hard reminder that a world free from gender discrimination, a world of freedom, is not given to us; it is always the precious reward of struggle.

Anita Gurumurthy is Executive Director and **Nandini Chami** is Deputy Director and Fellow – Research & Policy Engagement of [IT for Change](#).

Victims as heroes or villains: Double standards in covering two contemporary conflicts

Daya Thussu

As the world marks the first anniversary of the Hamas attack on Israel and its bloody aftermath, it is worth reflecting on the way this ongoing conflict has been covered by the US-dominated international media and compare it with media attitudes towards another contemporary conflict which has preoccupied international news headlines since February 2022 – the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Although news media are often accused of bias in the reporting of wars, the communication of conflict is also shaped by larger, geopolitical forces, through political institutions, think tanks, the military-industrial complex and transnational media corporations. Despite occasional challenges by the media to the predominant Western framing of wars, there is little doubt that the majority of the US-led Western media have tended to operate within the boundaries of a well-worn narrative (Thussu, 2025).

While the media in Western democracies operate free from direct government control and profess high professional standards of accuracy and accountability, they nevertheless act as instruments to legitimize the interests of their governments, especially in times of war and conflict. Western media coverage of the Israel-Hamas war

focuses more on Israel's self-defence and security in the context of Hamas terrorism, the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with a strong anti-Islamist angle.

The leading media outlets of the US frame the Russia-Ukraine conflict in terms of democracy versus authoritarianism, where Ukraine is depicted as defending its sovereignty against Putin's aggression. Russia, being an old adversary of the US, is presented as the unethical aggressor, committing war crimes, violating human rights, creating a global refugee crisis and trying to destabilize European security and global geopolitics.

COVERING THE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE – VICTIMS AS “HEROES”

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has received almost blanket coverage in the mainstream Western media, as the most serious threat to the liberal international system based on the inviolability of national sovereignty. The conflict has witnessed the most stringent sanctions imposed by the collective West on any country and can be seen as a form of economic “warfare” (Mulder, 2022: 3). For example, the US and the European Union (EU) moved to block major Russian banks from using SWIFT (Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication) the financial-communications system that facilitates the transfer of money around the world, a move which was described by the French finance minister as a “financial nuclear weapon” (quoted in Leali, 2022).

However, despite dire predictions in the mainstream media by Western experts – officials, think tanks and academics – that the Russian economy would collapse in three months after Moscow's misadventure, it not only survived but experienced modest growth, while Europe's biggest economy, Germany, is in recession. Most Western commentators did not take fully into account that the sanctions regime would be undermined by the new and not so new geopolitical and economic ties being forged outside the Euro-Atlantic zone, between Russia and other large

economies, notably China and India.

The communications aspect of the event followed the usual Western narrative in media coverage: the invasion was led by an “irrational” and “unwell” leader of an authoritarian state, who threatened use of weapons of mass destruction and was capable to declare a “nuclear war” (Zajec, 2022). This was used to justify the enormous military aid given to Ukraine, the US spending more than \$100 billion, while the EU pledged \$96 billion – a windfall for defence companies – supplying sophisticated weaponry.

The German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock's statement at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in January 2023, that the European nations were “fighting a war against Russia” put to rest any pretence that this was not a proxy war explicitly supported by NATO. In dominant media discourses the West's role in contributing to the conflict in Ukraine continues to be ignored: for example, its not very subtle support for toppling President Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014 sparked a crisis in eastern Ukraine and thwarted the Minsk-2 agreement a year later, which might have offered a compromise and averted the Russian invasion of 2022.

While Western media coverage highlighted the illegality and brutality of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the suffering of the Ukrainian people, in the global South the interest in this distant war was limited as it was seen, accurately, as a European affair. At the UN, many members of the global South did not isolate Russia diplomatically despite intense pressure from the US and its European allies. India (the biggest importer of Russian arms, and since the invasion, of its crude oil) and the United Arab Emirates abstained from crucial votes and, on 2nd March 2022, 35 countries abstained or voted against the Western-sponsored resolution to condemn the Russian invasion. Such sentiments were in evidence in other forums too. While Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky received standing ovations wherever he spoke – in Western parliaments, film festivals, security conferences --

when he addressed the African Union in June 2022, only four out of 55 invited heads of state attended the virtual session (BBC, 2022).

Double standards show in the way the conflict was framed in the media: unlike post-Cold War US military interventions – Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria and various other attempts and versions of “regime change” – the Russian invasion was presented as an unprovoked act of aggression, routinely labelled as “Putin’s war” recalling the ideological and geopolitical rivalry of the Cold War, as a clash between liberal democracy and authoritarianism, between European integration and Russian imperialism (Diesen, 2022).

For their part, the dominant framing in the Kremlin-controlled Russian media was that the war was an existential one to protect Russian geoeconomic interests and a pre-emptive “special military operation” in defence of NATO’s expansion to the borders of Russia. Protecting the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine’s eastern Donbas region and the “de-Nazification” of Ukraine shaped the official narrative emanating from Moscow both on and off-line in a powerful propaganda blitz deploying among others such networks as RT (formerly Russia Today) and the news agency Sputnik.

Russian cyberspace continues to be full of anti-Ukrainian diatribe and symbols, most notably “Z”, the Kremlin’s ubiquitous insignia of its “special military operation” (Garner, 2023). In addition, as the invasion took place, Russian journalists were forced to comply with military censorship – which included banning use of the terms like “war” or “invasion” forcing the closure of independent (read Western-oriented) media outlets such as *Novaya Gazeta* and *Echo Moscow* (Gessen, 2022).

The Ukraine invasion also starkly demonstrated Western double standards in representing the victims of war and conflict. Coverage in the mainstream Western media was full of reports about European, white-skinned, blue-eyed refugees, who were being allowed immediately into the EU, with Poland and Germany each receiving

more than one million Ukrainians in 2022. Germany had a policy of allowing Ukrainian refugees to stay without needing to go through the elaborate and highly bureaucratic asylum request processing; they were paid higher allowances and given an immediate work permit.

In contrast brown and black refugees received very different treatment. At the time of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the largest number of foreign students studying in that country was from India and they had extreme difficulties trying to leave Ukraine, until the Indian air force evacuated them; African students had even worse experiences (Thussu, 2025).

The dominant media narrative reflected Ukraine’s formidable support, advice and resources of Western, or more specifically, Anglo-American public relations and media managers. Ukraine’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the *Washington Post* reported, had a strong strategic communications unit, with advice “from the UK and the US” (Taylor, 2022). Zelensky’s persona is a great example of how the media and public relations experts can construct the image of a leader, one who demonstrates “tremendous courage” by remaining in Kyiv during the initial attack in February 2022, projecting an air of defiance to promote cohesion at home and support internationally.

Two days into the invasion, the AP reported that Zelensky had rejected a US offer to evacuate him from Kyiv, saying, “I need ammunition, not a ride.” A senior US official told the *New Yorker*, “To the best of my knowledge, that never happened. But hats off to Zelensky and the people around him. It was a great line” (quoted in Yaffa, 2022). The invasion and its mediatization made Zelensky a global icon being named by *Time* magazine as “2022 person of the year”, a decision “the most clear-cut in memory”, wrote the magazine’s editor-in-chief Edward Felsenthal (*Time*, 2022).

Hollywood icon Sean Penn, who made a documentary about the Ukraine war, handed his Oscar award to Zelensky as a symbol of faith in Ukraine’s victory, while Zelensky’s address at the

2022 Cannes film festival received a standing ovation. The president's former press secretary Iuliia Mendel helped organize channels of communication with celebrities and wrote a glowing account of the President (Mendel, 2022), which received overwhelmingly positive coverage in Western media. She explained that "as a former actor, Zelenskiy appreciates the power of actors, especially from Hollywood" (cited in Koshiw, 2023).

While this eulogizing was in full swing, there was hardly any coverage in the Western media of the bloodiest war of 2022 between the Ethiopian government and the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front, in which more than half a million people lost their lives between 2020 and 2022 (Schaap, 2023). The director-general of the World Health Organization, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus – who is from Tigray – labelled it as the "worst humanitarian crisis in the world" which had been totally ignored in the media, and commented that "maybe the reason is the colour of the skin of the people" (quoted in Reuters, 2022).

In a digitally connected world, saturated by visual geopolitics such "global racial imaginary" (Barder, 2021) often defines what or who is newsworthy. The unfortunate truth is that the most mortal war in contemporary times is the least reported – more than three million have died since the mid-1990s in the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo – sometimes referred to as "Africa's world war".

THE GAZA CATASTROPHE – VICTIMS AS "VILAINS"

While the victims of Russian invasion were lionized and helped materially and militarily by Western governments and received a very sympathetic response from the mainstream media, the victims of the Israeli invasion of Gaza are, more often than not, presented as partly culpable in their support for Hamas, denounced as Islamist "terrorists", sworn to the idea of the destruction of the Jewish state. Although the US and its European allies have made half-hearted calls

for de-escalation, they have continued to provide Israel with political support and a regular supply of high-end weaponry to sustain its war. A report from the Brown University's Watson Institute said that the US has spent \$17.9 billion on military aid to Israel since the war in Gaza started a year ago, the highest annual total. Israel, the US's strongest ally in the Middle East, is the biggest recipient of US military aid in history, taking in \$251.2 billion in inflation-adjusted dollars since 1959, according to the report (Bilmes, Hartung and Semler, 2024).

The Israeli invasion of Gaza was in response to the brutal attack by the Palestinian militant group Hamas on southern Israel during which at least 1,139 Israelis were killed. For more than a year now, almost impervious to international public opinion, Israel has been escalating its devastating offensive in the besieged Palestinian territory, killing so far nearly 42,000 people and wounding almost 100,000 (the majority being women and children). The civilian infrastructure and basic amenities of the narrow strip have been demolished by the constant bombardment, leading to 1.9 million Gazans displaced out of the estimated 2.2 million population (Al Jazeera, 2024). A large number of Palestinians are missing, buried under the debris.

At the outset, Gaza's communication system was destroyed, "hindering Hamas's command and control by targeting cell-phone towers in airstrikes and denying electricity to Palestinian Internet service providers" (Singer and Brooking, 2023: 8). This was done partly to ensure that the news and information from the besieged Gaza would not reach the outside world. The killing of dozens of local journalists covering the invasion – some Israel alleged were working for Hamas or at the very least sympathetic to the militant organization – further restricted the flow of news and information (Loveluck, Harb and Dehghanpoor, 2024).

Most Western media organizations have largely followed the Israeli version of this continuing atrocity, which openly flouts international and humanitarian law, and which many have de-

nounced as genocide. Operating under the military censor of the Israeli Defence Force (IDF), even leading global news networks such as CNN have tamely followed the IDF line on the progress of the war in Gaza. As the invasion began, CNN's News Standards and Practices division emailed to staff outlining how they should write about the war, instructing them that they should "describe the Ministry of Health as ' Hamas-controlled ' whenever we are referring to casualty statistics or other claims related to the present conflict". It also emphasised the need to "cover the broader current geopolitical and historical context of the story" while continuing to "remind our audiences of the immediate cause of this current conflict, namely the Hamas attack and mass murder and kidnap of Israeli civilians" (cited in Boguslaw, 2024).

Such coverage has provided a clear rationale for selective media attention. A CNN staffer was quoted in *The Guardian*: "the majority of news since the war began, regardless of how accurate the initial reporting, has been skewed by a systemic and institutional bias within the network toward Israel." A memo from Mark Thompson, the boss of CNN (and formerly of the BBC and the *New York Times*) said that while CNN would report the human consequences of the Israeli assault and the historical context of the story, "we must continue always to remind our audiences of the immediate cause of *this current conflict*, namely the Hamas attack and mass murder and kidnap of civilians" (Italics in the original) (cited in McGreal, 2024).

One result of such deference to Israeli censorship and restrictions on international journalists is that Israel's bombardment of aid convoys, refugee shelters, hospitals and even UN workers has been largely under reported, thus not generating the opposition which such actions deserve, despite strong public opinion in major Western cities as witnessed by regular and large anti-war protests. Addressing the annual UN General Assembly on September 23, 2024, the heads of the leading principal UN aid agencies summarized the situation in Gaza: "More than

two million Palestinians are without protection, food, water, sanitation, shelter, health care, education, electricity, and fuel – the basic necessities to survive."

Half-truths and even downright lies are part of Israel's public relations arsenal, most notably the claim that "40 decapitated babies" were allegedly found in the Kfar Aza kibbutz, one of the communities most impacted by the Hamas terrorist attack on 7 October 2023, which proved to be a rumour, as an investigation by *Le Monde* demonstrated (Maad, Audureau and Forey, 2024).

The two conflicts discussed above clearly indicate the double standards shown by US-dominated Western news organizations in covering conflict situations where vital geopolitical and economic interests are involved and how professional standards of journalism are subservient to relaying an acceptable narrative. ■

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Daya Thussu is Professor of International Communication at Hong Kong Baptist University and a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Commonwealth Studies, University of London. His latest book is *Changing Geopolitics of Global Communication* (Routledge, 2025).

Unearned prestige: How *The Economist* covers the war in Ukraine

Robert Hackett,
with Farrukh Chishtie

*"Pretend you are God." – Editor's advice on how to write like *The Economist*.*¹

In a confusing and turbulent world, many readers, presumably seeking comprehensive and reasonably objective international news, turn to *The Economist* (TE). It's a venerable self-described newspaper, in weekly magazine format and online, founded in Britain in 1843. Its current global circulation is over 1.4 million.

While historically a voice of the emerging Victorian-era financial class, its current readership in the U.S. reportedly skews slightly to the left,² as does its reputed editorial standpoint.³ That may be understandable. It calls itself "liberal" (albeit more in the European free market rather than American welfare state sense). TE is highly critical of Trump and populism, and takes climate change seriously, unlike many conservative American media. A status symbol for commuter train readers and executive aspirants, the newspaper offers a timely, convenient, readable overview of global developments in politics, business, science and arts. Its data-packed multi-coloured maps and graphs are widely acclaimed. Some of my friends occasionally cite TE as an authoritative oracle on global issues.

But skimming its coverage of various issues, including the war in Ukraine, I became doubtful its prestige is warranted. After reading an eye-opening recent history of *The Economist* by Alexander Zevin (*Liberalism at Large*, cited in the epigraph above), I devised a collaborative

project with several colleagues.⁴ We looked at credible sources critical of NATO's official line on Ukraine, notably *War in Ukraine*, a concise primer by Code Pink co-founder Medea Benjamin and journalist Nicolas J.S. Davies,⁵ as well as commentaries by social scientists like John Mearsheimer, John Bellamy Foster and others. And we dove into *TE* itself, identifying 405 relevant articles published between January 2022, on the eve of war, and July 2023, shortly after a NATO summit.⁶ We paid particular attention to editorials or "leaders", and to the sources – the people and institutions quoted – in a sample of every tenth news report, a total of forty.

CONTENDING NARRATIVES

Consumers of mainstream media in the U.S. or U.K. are familiar with the standard view of the war in Ukraine. In this view – call it the NATO Narrative –, the war results from Russia's unjustified, brutal and unprovoked attack against a much smaller and fragile democratic country. The invasion is seen as a "war of choice" by a ruthless dictator, Russian president Vladimir Putin, one motivated by his paranoid psychology, domestic political problems, hatred of a functioning democracy on Russian borders, contempt for Ukrainian nationality, and/or his imperial ambitions.

Unless stopped by military force, Putin's forces would not only conquer Ukraine but drive further west, seeking to restore the former Soviet empire. Trying to negotiate a settlement with Putin would constitute appeasement. The NATO Narrative's implicit historical precedent is the West's capitulation to Hitler's territorial demands at Munich, leading to the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia and then World War II. Now, the West should keep arming Ukraine until victory, while avoiding a direct confrontation with NATO forces that could trigger nuclear holocaust.

The NATO Narrative is no mere fabrication. War crimes, internal repression, ruthless mercenaries, political assassinations, international law violations – the Putin regime ticks the boxes of infamy. But it's a dangerously sim-

plistic black-and-white story. Leaving aside Putin's own propaganda, there is an evidence-based counter-narrative. It suggests that neither NATO nor Ukraine's politicians are entirely innocent in this dreadful conflict's escalation. Let's call this the Dissident Discourse.

The NATO narrative portrays Ukraine as a functioning Western-style democracy, but downplays corruption and other unsavoury characteristics. Putin's claim that Ukraine needs "de-Nazification" is a serious exaggeration. But extreme right-wing forces – including many who venerate Ukrainian nationalists who massacred Jews and Poles in World War II – do exert outsize influence in the country's military and politics.⁷ Far right pressure was one reason the Kyiv government failed to implement the Minsk II peace accords after 2014, intended to end the civil war between Russian-speaking separatists in eastern and southern regions against western-oriented Ukrainian speakers.⁸ The ultra-nationalist Azov Regiment, sometimes previously described by Western media (like *The Guardian*) as full of neo-Nazis,⁹ received a media "whitewash" after Russia's invasion.¹⁰ *The Economist* was no exception, hailing the unit (in a lionizing interview with Ukraine's president Volodymyr Zelenskyy, April 2/22) as heroic defenders of the city of Mariupul.

In the Dissident Discourse, Ukraine's agony can't be separated from the clashing geopolitical designs of the great powers, including the U.S. A pivotal moment was the 2014 overthrow of Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich. Western media, including *The Economist*, generally described this as a popular uprising, starting in Kyiv's Maidan square, against a "crooked thug" (Feb. 26/22), a "grasping pro-Russian president" (June 24/23). The Dissident Discourse suggests a more complex reality. *TE* ignored the active role of the U.S., through Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland, and the U.S. Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt, in encouraging the opposition and handpicking future government leaders.¹¹ Maidan was as much a coup as a popular revolt, displacing a corrupt but democratically elected (in 2010) president – which didn't stop *TE* from

claiming that “the Maidan protests established democracy in 2014” (April 2/22).

Moreover, for the Dissident Discourse, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine was not “unprovoked”. Rather, the U.S. strategic “great game” is to arm Ukraine and use a bloody proxy war to “weaken” Russia (as U.S. Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin later described his government’s goal) and to bring about regime change.¹² Indeed, according to Ukraine’s press in March 2022, after the invaders suffered initial setbacks, Russia and Ukraine began negotiating a potential peace deal, with Turkish mediation. But British and American leaders, including U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson in Kyiv in April 2022, intervened to press Zelensky to carry on the fight.¹³ Western news media did not amplify this episode, until Putin repeated it in an interview with far right broadcaster Tucker Carlson in February 2024 – after which most media dismissed it as Russian propaganda.

Consider what U.S. and NATO policy must look like from Moscow. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, NATO added new members (and nuclear-capable weapons) ever closer to the Russian border, violating promises made to then-president Mikhail Gorbachev that NATO would not move “one inch to the east”. Rather than accept Gorbachev’s vision of a transnational security framework from Lisbon to Vladivostok, NATO remilitarized.¹⁴ Russians across the political spectrum opposed Ukraine’s potential membership in NATO, and many Western authorities, including the esteemed diplomat George F. Kennan, warned of future repercussions from NATO’s disregard of Russian “red lines”.

Instead of cashing in a peace dividend for civilian spending, Washington sought to offset its fading global economic sway through flexing military might. That included waging war in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and elsewhere, and pursuing nuclear primacy through developing first-strike capacity, which creates an incentive to demolish the enemy’s arsenal before it can be used – an inherently more destabilizing

strategy than MAD, “mutually assured destruction”. In 2002, 2019 and 2020, the US unilaterally withdrew from nuclear arms limitations treaties that hindered developing the first-strike option.¹⁵

In this Dissident Discourse, the appropriate historical analogy is not Munich, but the Cuban missile crisis. Invoking its unilateral claim to hegemony over the western hemisphere, embodied in the Monroe Doctrine, the U.S. administration in 1962 risked thermonuclear war in order to force the Soviet Union to remove missiles from Cuba. The crisis was resolved not by continued escalation, but by a compromise – the U.S. withdrew missiles from Turkey – kept secret for decades.

The above summaries barely sketch the complex forces at play. Could global citizens turn to *The Economist* for context and explanation, from differing credible perspectives, to make sense of a senseless conflict?

On the eve of war, the newspaper seemed to promise such journalism. It published invited online essays interpreting the conflict, including one from Mearsheimer identifying NATO’s eastward expansion as a primary cause. But that was it. Once Russian tanks rolled in, *TE*’s reportage, while elegantly written, seemed as lopsided as any warmongering tabloid.

ECONO-MYSTIFYING EDITORIALS?

The themes of *TE*’s editorials essentially parallel the NATO Narrative.

First, Putin is a dangerous aggressor. He has launched an invasion motivated by imperial ambition – “restoring the glory of the Russian empire” (March 12/22). He has threatened to use atomic weapons, threats that have “overturned the nuclear order” (June 4/22). No mention of America’s longer standing and destabilizing pursuit of nuclear primacy.

Second, Ukraine *must* ultimately win the war, and it needs the West’s military and economic help to do so. Escalation is the necessary response. American diplomacy has “recovered”

from the Trump years and is offering “whole-hearted leadership of NATO”, while Germany has “overturned decades of timid defence policy” (March 26/22). “The door to a future diplomatic settlement” when both sides are ready “should be left open” but a ceasefire now “would be deeply disadvantageous to Ukraine, halting its momentum” (Nov. 19/22).

Third, Ukraine *can* win the war. Editorials were initially optimistic about Ukraine’s resilience and military prowess. But as the tides of war changed from successful defence of Kyiv to Ukraine’s unsuccessful counter-offensive in 2023 to apparent stalemate, increasingly strident editorials called for accelerated Western military aid. The West “is still too cautious about supplying weapons to reverse...Putin’s invasion” (Jan. 14/23), and should rapidly supply tanks and jet fighters (April 29/23).

Fourth, conversely, Putin isn’t as strong as he might seem. *TE* highlighted, even speculatively, signs of political instability, isolation or battlefield failure by Russia. “A war in Ukraine would have terrible consequences, especially for Russia” (Jan. 29/22)... “Are the sanctions working?... isolation from Western markets will cause havoc in Russia” (August 27/22). “The Wagner mutiny exposes the Russian tyrant’s growing weakness” (July 1/23) – weeks before the mercenary force’s leadership was killed in a suspicious plane crash and its threat to Putin eliminated. “Vladimir Putin’s war is failing. The West should help it fail faster” (Sept. 17/22). Not until December 2, 2023, after nearly two years of pontificating on Putin’s weaknesses, did an *Economist* leader concede that Putin seems to be winning. That was a consideration, not for re-evaluating its triumphalist stance, but for calling on Europe’s NATO partners to do more.

Fifth, war is not the worst option. Somehow, from the economic and human wreckage, “a stable and successful country could emerge from the trauma of Russia’s invasion” (April 9/22). *TE* downplayed the threat of nuclear escalation, since “even a dictator with an overdeveloped sense of his own destiny has a nose for survival and

the ebb and flow of power” (Feb. 26/22). A *TE* “briefing” (backgrounder) detailed the “ladder of escalation”, as outlined by nuclear strategist Herman Kahn – identified by *TE* as an inspiration for the satirical film *Dr. Strangelove* – that could lead to nuclear omnicide. But while sensibly advocating that NATO avoid direct conflict with Putin’s forces, it portrayed Russian aggression as the sole threat, ignoring US first-strike strategy and NATO’s refusal to renounce the first use of nuclear weapons. *TE* argued that his nuclear rhetoric “gives Mr Putin an advantage that he will press until he is firmly pressed back against” (April 9/22).

Sixth, NATO is a “defensive alliance” (Feb. 26/22) with honourable motives. “Western leaders have wisely insisted that Ukraine should determine its own objectives. Ukrainians are dying in a conflict all about the right of sovereign countries to decide their own future” (April 9/22).

Decide their own future? Consider that claim in light of *The Economist*’s history, discussed below.

SOURCES: WHO GETS TO SPEAK?

News reports during the first 18 months of war generally reflected those themes. Narratives and sources shape each other. The newspaper’s sense of what the story is about influences who is considered qualified and appropriate to quote. Conversely, quotes are blocks that build and legitimize the narrative; they are all the more important in a journal, like *TE*, not known for doing investigative journalism. In our sample of articles, over 80 percent (33 of 40) included at least one source from Western countries – European NATO members, the U.S., and a handful of fellow travellers, like Finland. Ukrainians were cited in 19, Russians in 16. Just 13 had voices from the global South, anti-Western regimes, and/or international institutions like the UN.

Thus, *TE* defines the conflict through Western eyes, more than those of the direct combatants. Not surprising, given its historical roots and publication base in the U.K. and its increasing

orientation towards an American readership.¹⁶

Perhaps more significant is the *type* of sources who anchor *TE's* reportage. Over three-quarters of the articles (31 of 40) quoted official State sources – heads of government, senior government officials or politicians, diplomats, national intelligence agencies, security advisers, occasional regional or city officials, or countries-by-name. Sixty percent cited independent academics, research institutes, analysts, consultants or experts. Most of these were from American or British institutions; a few were experts with non-European names but working in the West.

Over a third (15 of 40) accessed military sources, mainly senior officers, often retired and thus, presumably, able to speak relatively freely. Very few were rank-and-file soldiers doing the killing and dying.

Civilians were cited in 11 of 40 pieces – over a quarter, more than typical war reportage. Most of these were Ukrainian, the country under attack. Stories of how ordinary Ukrainians were coping, contributing to the war effort, or suffering from Russian attacks (like the atrocities in Bucha, near Kyiv) help to humanize the victims and to evoke sympathy to their plight. More journalism on the perspectives and experiences of those most impacted by war would surely be welcome. But would the *Economist* devote the same attention to victims of aggression by a Western ally? Or are there double standards in news about victims, as Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman have argued: victims of the West's enemies are “worthy” of sympathy and coverage, while victims of Western allies (in, say, Palestine) are “unworthy”.¹⁷ Consider two relevant studies of America's press. Compared to Iraqis after the U.S. invasion, Ukrainian civilians were quoted nearly eight times as often;¹⁸ and the *New York Times* had far harsher language for Russian “massacres” in Ukraine than for Israel's very similar “attacks” and “errors” in Gaza.¹⁹

In news directly about the conflict, just 7 of 40 articles quoted corporations or businesses. Only two of those cited firms from the defence sector, whose wartime stock value skyrocketed.²⁰

Thirteen articles quoted news media, journalists or bloggers, including *The Economist* itself in 6 pieces, and several Russian outlets, usually described as state media or propagandists, a description not applied to Western or Ukrainian media.

These sourcing patterns suggest journalism through a “war” lens from the start – not diplomacy, economy, environment, or conflict analysis with a broader historical and human scope. That's important, because such conventional conflict reporting focuses on physical violence between “our” side and “theirs”, and tends to make military intervention and escalation seem the most rational response. By contrast, a new approach called “peace journalism” – often discussed in *Media Development* – has developed tools for helping society to recognize and value opportunities for nonviolent conflict resolution.²¹

The combination of Western geopolitical bias and war/violence orientation helps explain why so many relevant voices are absent from our sample: very few religious leaders, non-western international agencies, non-governmental organizations, ordinary Russians, humanitarian organizations, or cultural figures like writers. And no peace activists, Ukrainian dissidents, international courts, or (after Mearsheimer) academic critics of Western policy.

IS *THE ECONOMIST* A PROPAGANDA TOOL FOR RULING ELITES?

In their well-known propaganda model, critical scholars Herman and Chomsky argued that the American press functions to frame issues and select sources in a way that reflects the narrow range of opinion within the dominant elites.²² Several structural filters, such as corporate ownership, advertising dependence and institutional source bias, ensure that the news media generally “manufacture consent” to ruling elite policies and worldviews.

Despite its oversimplification and the cacophony of voices emerging in the internet era, this model still tells us something about the power

and biases of corporate media, whose reach now extends into the digital realm.

But Alexander Zevin's detailed history of *The Economist*, from its origins in Britain as a beacon of economic liberalism, implies that the model doesn't quite fit. For one thing, its "unusual ownership structure" gives the senior editor a great deal of autonomy from business pressure and the Economist Group's board of directors.²³ The most important filter may be the newspaper's own institutional history and ideology.

Moreover, *The Economist* isn't a reflection of ruling elites – it's *part of them*. That's evident in many ways: the migration of senior *Economist* journalists to positions in high finance, regulatory agencies, government cabinets, intelligence services; clubby meetings with the likes of Ronald Reagan and other neoliberal politicians; heavy recruitment from Oxford and Cambridge universities; and *TE*'s historical capacity not only to defend the ideology of economic liberalism, but to mould and fashion its very principles.

Consider its editorial performance in recent history, as Zevin summarizes it. Unconditional support for U.S. military involvement in Vietnam, with coverage structured by the Cold War frame of communism versus liberalism. Offering articles "more like pep talks than dispassionate analyses."²⁴ Dismissing the My Lai massacre as an isolated incident. Justifying government lying after Daniel Ellsberg released the Pentagon Papers during the war. More recently, condemning the whistleblowers – Brad (now Chelsea) Manning, Julian Assange, Ed Snowden – who revealed the extent and crimes of the National Security State.²⁵

The paper has whitewashed other massacres by pro-Western governments, like the Indonesian regime's slaughter of hundreds of thousands of allegedly leftist peasants (1965) and its invasion of East Timor (from 1975 on). *TE* helped prepare public opinion for the violent overthrow of Chilean president Salvador Allende (1973), systematically emphasizing negative news about his democratically elected socialist government. Political correspondent Robert Moss, who

used *TE* as a cover for paid intelligence agency work, connected the Chilean military with the free market economists who advised the brutal post-Allende junta.²⁶

During the 1970s, *TE* mooted preparing plans to bomb and invade Cuba for its support of leftist rebels in Angola, called for swift retribution against the Iranian hostage-takers, and advocated the arming of right-wing rebels or governments in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala.

Its hawkish drum-banging continued after the first Cold War. After Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, *TE* called for war before president George H.W. Bush did. After the 9/11 attacks, the newspaper again called for war, without identifying against whom, where, for what goals.²⁷ It applauded each stage of the buildup to the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

No wonder a retiring foreign editor, to nervous laughter from his colleagues, joked that "*The Economist* never met a war it didn't like."²⁸

Most relevant to its recent coverage of the Ukraine war, *TE* called for the end of détente with the Soviet Union in 1979, urging unilateral re-armament by the West. When the USSR collapsed, the newspaper took a hard line – no Marshall Plan for Russia, no compromise with its reformist leader Gorbachev, no strategic reciprocity to dismantle NATO as well as the Warsaw Pact; to the contrary, NATO should expand eastward.²⁹

TOWARDS JOURNALISM FOR PEACE?

We aren't accusing *TE* of widespread factual inaccuracy. Rather, it works ideologically through wording choices, selectivity and omissions – of contexts, sources and events (like Boris Johnson's negotiation-quashing visit to Kyiv). *TE*'s conceptual framing of the conflict adopts the dichotomy increasingly used in Western security discourse – autocracy versus liberalism (and sometimes, democracy, which has different connotations). It's a flexible framework that provides a glow of righteousness to the West's militarization and its role in the great power rivalry that has arguably

generated a “New Cold War”.³⁰ That simplistic framework also accommodates undemocratic countries that accept the U.S.-dominated “rules-based international order”.³¹

Nor do we justify Putin’s regime or aggression, or deny Ukraine’s right of self-defence. Rather, we seek journalism that offers readers more comprehensive analyses of conflict from diverse perspectives. *The Economist’s* geographical and topical breadth are two dimensions needed in media for building a global community. But it is hampered by ideological and geo-cultural biases. In effect, *TE* operates as a kind of conversational partner with Anglo-American policy and economic elites, both advising them and translating their worldviews to broader publics. In doing so, it often provides journalism that incentivizes conflict escalation – that is, “war” journalism as defined by media scholars, focusing on physical violence, elite sources, the other side’s propaganda and misdeeds, and a two-sided framing of conflicts.³²

As a critical antidote, the world desperately needs more peace journalism. It would highlight opportunities for peaceful conflict resolution, prioritize the human impact of conflicts, amplify the voices of civilians and marginalized groups, and analyze the multiple sources of, and potential exits from, violent conflict. An exemplary case was *Democracy Now’s* coverage of the G7 meeting in Hiroshima, emphasizing the lessons of nuclear warfare and advocating for peace in Ukraine.³³

How to nurture peace journalism, especially on a transnational scale, is an ongoing question. In the meantime, *TE* readers could supplement their diet with a diversity of quality media – and many grains of salt. ■

Notes

1. From Alexander Zevin, *Liberalism at Large: The World According to the Economist* (London, New York: Verso, 2021), p. 5.
2. [Where News Audiences Fit on the Political Spectrum | Pew Research Center](#)
3. [Lean Left | AllSides](#)
4. We gratefully acknowledge assistance from Dr. Sheila Delany, emerita professor of English at Simon Fraser University, and two research assistants funded through SFU’s work/

- study programme.
5. Medea Benjamin & Nicolas J.S. Davies, *War in Ukraine: Making Sense of a Senseless Conflict* (New York/London, OR Books, 2022),
6. The corpus of articles derives from physical/print copies of *The Economist*, where available, and digital copies available in [ProQuest.com](#), otherwise. The keywords “Russia”, “Ukraine” or “Russia-Ukraine war” in the title or subheadings were the filters. A total of 405 articles (after eliminating 3 duplicates) were found between January 2022 and July 24, 2023.
7. [Secretary Blinken Faces a Big Test in Ukraine, Where Nazis and Their Sympathizers Are Glorified | The Nation](#)
8. Benjamin and Davies, p. 58.
9. [Azov fighters are Ukraine’s greatest weapon and may be its greatest threat | Ukraine | The Guardian](#)
10. [Hawkish Pundits Downplay Threat of War, Ukraine’s Nazi Ties — FAIR](#)
11. Benjamin and Davies, pp. 35-38.
12. Benjamin and Davies, p. 71; <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2022/03/30/why-the-us-and-nato-have-long-wanted-russia-to-attack-ukraine/>; <https://www.cato.org/commentary/biden-fails-explain-why-us-should-fight-proxy-war-against-russia>
13. Benjamin and Davies, pp. 84-85.
14. Katrina van den Heuvel, interview with Alternative Radio (David Barsamian), April 11, 2022.
15. John Bellamy Foster, “The U.S. Quest for Nuclear Primacy”, *Monthly Review*, February 2024, pp. 1-21.
16. Zevin, pp. 1, 332.
17. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (NY: Pantheon, 1988), chapter 2.
18. [How Much Less Newsworthy Are Civilians in Other Conflicts? — FAIR](#)
19. [Words like Slaughter: A comparative study of The New York Times reporting in Ukraine and Gaza – Mondoweiss](#)
20. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine sparked a defense boom. It’s likely to outlast the war | CNN Business
21. E.g. Jake Lynch and Annabel McGoldrick, *Peace Journalism* (Stroud, UK: Hawthorn, 2005).
22. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 1988).
23. Zevin, p. 20.
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Robert Hackett (Ph.D.), professor emeritus of communication at Simon Fraser University, writes about media, politics and environment, including *Journalism and Climate Crisis* (2017). **Farrukh A. Chishtie** (Ph.D., Ph.D.) is a climate scientist leading Peaceful Society, Science and Innovation Foundation, and is affiliated with the University of British Columbia (UBC) at the UBC Sustainability Hub. An earlier version of this article appeared in [Counterpunch.org](#), August 23, 2024.

Why Al Jazeera's news coverage of Israel's war on Gaza has gained global credibility

Kiran Hassan

The Council of Europe defines the role of media in conflict situations and wars as critical to providing the public with accurate and timely information. It suggests that the supply of trustworthy news and images contributes to the protection of civilians and conflict prevention and is key in gaining the attention of the international community for violations of human rights and international humanitarian law (Council of Europe). By this definition, the Al Jazeera news network enacted the role of responsible media by covering Israel's over-a year-long war on Gaza, which started after Hamas brutally killed 1,200 and kidnapped 197 Israelis on October 7, 2023.

As Israel's war on Gaza unfolded, Al Jazeera's 24-hour coverage provided details of the bloody conflict, which to date has killed over 42,000 Palestinians – mostly women and children – to Arab and international audiences. The Reuters Institute has hailed Al Jazeera for offering the Palestinian perspective, not just in terms of news reporting but also with regard to in-depth analysis (Reuters Institute).

Al Jazeera's outreach and influence has noticeably increased as the news network's reporting on Gaza has influenced global public opinion

towards the Palestinian people and their struggle for an independent state since 1948. By offering the Palestinian side of the story, Al Jazeera has widened the credence and momentum of the demand for an independent Palestinian state like never before. It operates in contrast to most mainstream Western news networks who remain committed to highlighting Israel's position, aligned with their respective governments.

This article argues that Al Jazeera has followed its motto of providing a “voice to the voiceless”, thereby standing apart from other news networks, appearing as a leader in editorial independence and in the condemnation of the killing of journalists and civilians. By offering authentic war coverage, Al Jazeera has substantially increased its international viewership and become known as a credible and watchdog news organization with global prominence.

DEFENDING THE MESSENGERS

Press freedom and human rights organizations hold the Israeli military to be particularly brutal towards journalists covering Gaza after 7 October 2023. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) reports that 128 journalists and media workers have been killed in one year by the Israeli forces, of which 123 are Palestinian, two are Israeli and three Lebanese; 40 journalists have been reported injured, 2 journalists are missing and 69 journalists have been [arrested](#). CPJ condemns the Israeli military forces for multiple assaults, cyber-attacks and killings of family members of journalists in Gaza. The organization claims that the killing and assault of Palestinian journalists in Gaza in a year outnumbers the killing of journalists in most conflicts and calls it the deadliest period for journalists since the organization started gathering data in 1992 (Committee to Protect Journalists).

CPJ's outcry is backed by Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF), who consequentially filed four complaints at the International Criminal Court (ICC) for these shocking violations of press freedom, which, according to the Press Freedom organization, were carried out with impunity. Despite the reporting of war crimes against jour-

nalists in Gaza, the perpetrators have not been brought to justice and the crimes have continued. According to RSF, although the Israeli authorities claimed they did not target journalists, multiple testimonies, investigations, and even statements given by the Israeli army suggest otherwise (Reporters Sans Frontières).

Al Jazeera correspondents have been particular targets of the Israeli forces and the news network has faced more intimidation than any other news organization in Gaza and the West Bank. For example, Al Jazeera Correspondent Wael Al-Dahdouh lost [most of his immediate family](#) in an Israeli airstrike. Al-Dahdouh was then injured less than two months later by a [drone strike](#) in Khan Younis, which killed his colleague, cameraman Samer Abu Daqqa. Al-Dahdouh's son Hamza was killed by an Israeli strike on 7 January 2024 (Carnegieendowment.org). Al Jazeera news correspondents were also targeted by Israeli forces before 7 October 2023. The killing of Al Jazeera's journalist Shireen Abu Akleh, who died on 11 May 2022 after being shot at the back of the head by Israeli forces while she was covering an Israeli military operation in the occupied West Bank, is another example (CNN, 12 May 2023).

The backlash by the Israeli government in response to the accusations by press freedom and human rights organizations of war crimes against journalists covering Gaza is widespread. Banning foreign media, allowing very limited international news crews to visit under strict conditions and asking the world to rely on government press statements and the words of officials does not provide sufficient information about the actual conduct of the war. With strict restrictions placed on the international media, journalists in Gaza have had to work as freelance reporters, providing graphic 24-hour video footage of the Israeli army attacking Palestinians to Al Jazeera and other news networks.

Al Jazeera became the main news platform to run the footage and stories coming from journalists in Gaza. The network also joined the international press freedom and human rights

organizations in raising awareness around the highly alarming and dangerous conditions of journalists reporting from Gaza. Written columns and special television programmes like "The Listening Post" were available on the network's website dedicated to highlighting this issue. Subsequently, Al Jazeera news was the only international news channel appearing to stand for freedom of speech and media rights in solidarity with their fellow journalists. Al Jazeera is also the main international news channel whose current staff members were targeted and killed by Israeli forces. Al Jazeera's support for journalist safety was in contrast with most International mainstream Western news organizations, which chose to ignore the story – their bias against Gaza being called out by their own staff members.

TELLING THE HUMAN STORY

Media's projections of the war and related content, videos and images help fashion the global discourse on the conflict. A transparent and unbiased understanding of the war is the most effective way of informing the audience (Pandey, 2022). Authentic war footage has historically shaped public opinion and impacted the outcome of several conflicts. War coverage of film and photos of real events play a part in how the conflict is perceived and recorded. For example, Nic Ut's Pulitzer Prize-winning iconic photo "Napalm Girl" turned US public opinion against the government during the Vietnam war, George Bush's call for allies to join in a global war against Afghanistan was strengthened after showing the footage of planes colliding with twin towers on 9/11. Graphic images and video footage deliver long lasting impressions in human memory, mobilizing human support and carving public opinion.

In the case of Israel's war on Gaza, Al Jazeera appears to be the main news network which reported the ground story as it was and shared live video footage, video interviews, graphic images and Israeli and Palestinian social media trends as part of its news packages. The major Western news networks like CNN and the

BBC have been criticized for providing biased coverage: the BBC has been accused of having a war narrative biased in favour of Israel. A protest email by some BBC staff members sent to the Director-General, Tim Davie, complained that the news network used words such as “massacre”, “slaughter” and “atrocities” when describing Hamas’s attack on Israel, while it refrained from describing Israel’s bombardment of Gaza in a similarly negative way. Layla Maghribi, the BBC’s North Africa correspondent resigned in protest saying she believed that the climate of intimidation against journalists and the failure of mainstream outlets to humanise Palestinians was causing the Arabic-speaking world and Arab diaspora in the West to lose even more faith in the credibility of Western media coverage. When resigning she said, “We’re not just witnessing a breakdown in humanity, we are witnessing a breakdown in the profession” (Al Jazeera, 29 Oct 2023).

During the previous major Gaza invasion in 2009, according to the *Jerusalem Post*, American viewership of Al-Jazeera English rose dramatically. As Al Jazeera English and Arabic channels were not shown on cable television in the United States, Al Jazeera’s live videos were made available on the internet which were then shared on social media platforms. Graphic pictures of dead and injured women and children which the US networks did not show captured the attention of Americans, generating enormous sympathy for the Palestinians and their cause (*Jerusalem Post*, 25 January 2009).

In the current conflict, Al Jazeera video footage of the war repeatedly went viral on social media platforms prompting an American youth movement supporting Palestinians which shook several American University campuses. Similar anti-war / pro peace protests in favour of Palestinians were observed amongst the global youth, especially in Western university campuses and capitals. Western media’s attempt to defend Israel’s justification of killings of children and civilians in Gaza when they were used as human shields by Hamas was widely denied as being a

false narrative. As a result, trust and credibility which are essential in the reputational esteem of any news networks were seriously undermined.

Global youth overtly rejected and criticized the sanitized, biased government-led news stories, especially when they had access to live streaming of Israeli brutalities via social media. Moreover, to check misinformation and counter fake news on social media, many government officials and global capitals turned to Al Jazeera to verify news coming out of Gaza, as the only media outlet with journalists reporting on the ground.

Al Jazeera’s poignant footage of the devastating destruction of buildings in Gaza, punishment of kneeled and stripped medical staff, images and video footage of dead, injured and hungry children, killing of foreign aid workers, video footage of Israeli soldiers molesting Palestinian prisoners, killing and targeting of Palestinian journalists was shared in daily news packages in believable and trustworthy formats.

While traditional war coverage of newsrooms which mainly relied upon sanitized images and official narratives has collapsed, Al Jazeera’s global viewership and credibility have soared. Through its comprehensive and more authentic coverage of the Palestinians’ suffering, it has perhaps helped to create a global virtual community of anti-war sentiment and support, particularly among global youth – a form of “imagined community”, as described by Benedict Anderson.

GAINING INTERNATIONAL CLOUT

When Al Jazeera launched its first TV broadcast as an Arabic-language satellite news channel in 1996 from Doha, Qatar, it provided live debate as the first independent news channel in the Arab world. Since then, it has grown into the Al Jazeera Media Network, with several outlets in multiple languages. The network now includes television channels, websites and other digital platforms and has led international coverage of some of the world’s most pivotal events including US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the war in Afghanistan

and the Arab Springs in 2011. Amidst the Qatar and Saudi tensions in 2015, multiple countries blamed Al Jazeera for showing opposition voices in countries like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates (UAE) where such opinions were not included in local coverage (Al Jazeera, 26 October 2021).

Al Jazeera has enjoyed a significant rise in its popularity and increase in Western audience while covering these conflicts. In the past, it saw an addition of up to 4 million subscribers from Europe at the start of the Iraq war in 2003 (*The Guardian*, 25 March 2003). At present, because of covering Gaza, Al Jazeera English has seen a record high in its numbers amongst the English-speaking audience. According to *Press Gazette*, between June 2022 and October 2023, Al Jazeera English was the fourth biggest news publisher on YouTube: CNN had 15.7 million subscribers, ABC News 15.2 million, BBC news 15.1 million and Al Jazeera English had 11.7 million YouTube subscribers (*Press Gazette*, Oct 2023).

The news network has been repeatedly targeted for covering these conflicts. After 9/11, Al Jazeera was the only TV station with a permanent 24-hour satellite link to Kabul during the Afghan war, and its exclusive footage was used by many Western channels. It also became famous for broadcasting videotape messages from al-Qaida leaders. Al Jazeera's bureau in Kabul was bombed by the US during the Afghan war, as was its bureau in Baghdad during the US-led invasion of Iraq. It was later reported that George Bush had wanted to bomb Al Jazeera's headquarters in Qatar too but had been discouraged from doing so by the British prime minister, Tony Blair (*The Guardian*, 20 September 2011).

After 7 October 2023, the Americans displayed apprehension with regard to Al Jazeera's presence and reporting on Gaza. During his visit to Doha on October 13 2023, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken reportedly [asked](#) Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al-Thani to "turn down the volume" of Al Jazeera's Gaza coverage. While the Biden ad-

ministration has not used military force against the channel, they have turned a blind eye to Israel's killing of Al Jazeera journalists and their families (Carnegieendowment.org).

This time the attempt to muzzle Al Jazeera was done by the Israeli government. Prime Minister Netanyahu called it a "Terror Channel" and the Israeli Parliament passed a law for its closure in the region. With the support of Israel's parliament, Al Jazeera's office in Ramallah in the West Bank was raided by the Israeli military on 23 September 2024 enforcing closure for 45 days (PBS News). Meanwhile, the network's cable outreach has expanded in other countries.

In the UK, Al Jazeera English and Al Jazeera Arabic HD channels are available on the Freeview platform (channels 251 and 252), on Sky channel 511, Virgin Media channel 622 and Freesat channel 203. Al Jazeera's live stream is also available on YouTube and Al Jazeera.com (Al Jazeera, 19 August 2024). Al Jazeera Media Network (AJMN) and Globecast have also launched a comprehensive global distribution of the AJMN suit of channels on multiple delivery platforms and distribution services. This includes global satellite distribution on five continents, along with terrestrial distribution to affiliates and a back-up cloud OTT platform for its suite of channels including Al Jazeera English, Arabic and Documentary (SVG News Europe, 4 Oct 2024).

A report published by Brookings Institute in 2013 referred to Al Jazeera as the most-feared news network in the world. The report argued that, by having the backing of the Arab audience, Al Jazeera had the key to shaping Arab opinion much more than its competitors like Abu Dhabi TV, Al Arabiya, BBC Arabic, Iran's Alalam, and French and Russian Arabic stations. The news network is most popular amongst Arabs because it has been for years a media mouthpiece for the Arab world especially in the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine (Brookings, 15 June 2013).

The rise of Al Jazeera has undoubtedly left an indelible mark on the region's politics, her-

alded a new era in Middle East media, and introduced new dynamics in global media flows and international communication (Zayani, 2016). Where CNN, BBC, New York Times, France 24/7 and Australian news reporting has been in line with their governments' positions on the war, audiences have turned to Al Jazeera, with second choices being Al Arabia (Saudi Arabia), TRT (Turkey), CGTN(China), First Post (India) for fact-based coverage on Gaza.

CONCLUSION

With war and conflict increasingly being live streamed and shared on social media platforms, the rules of war reporting for traditional media platforms have shifted. It is obvious that audiences will mostly believe what they see in terms of visual images. Al Jazeera's strategy of providing news in response to the changing demand of global media consumers has transformed its status from a news network "for and by the Arabs" into a global news network attracting credibility and trust. In 2004, many predicted that the new Emir of Qatar had envisaged Al Jazeera news network as a tool for Qatar's soft power. After two decades, this argument holds more promise than ever. ■

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Dr **Kiran Hassan** is an Associate Research Fellow at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London.

Venice (Italy) 2024

The 13th INTERFILM Award for Promoting Interreligious Dialogue has gone to *Quiet Life* directed by Alexandros Avranas (France, Germany, Sweden, Greece, Estonia, Finland).

Motivation: “Quiet Life” is not always quiet at all. A family is seeking asylum, which is unfortunately denied. The rejection results in a mysterious coma for the two children – the so called “child resignation syndrome”. This incredibly dense film is clearly structured, the actors’ performances are deeply touching and stressful at the same time, and confront us with the hypocrisy of a so called human, but indeed a bureaucracy as cold as ice. By choosing this film we encourage people to think about human dignity, strengthen solidarity with asylum seekers, and promote our awareness for all kinds of rejection.

Members of the 2024 Jury: Ingrid Glatz, Switzerland; Stefan Haupt, Switzerland; Naomi Evelyn Hondrea, Italy/Romania; Jes Nysten, Denmark (President of the Jury); Barbara Schantz-Derboven, Germany.

Locarno (Switzerland) 2024

At the 77th Film Festival Locarno (7-17 August 2024), the Ecumenical Jury, appointed by INTERFILM and SIGNIS, awarded its Prize, endowed with 10.000 CHF by the Reformed Churches and the Catholic Church in Switzerland, to *Akiplėša* (Toxic) directed by Saulė Bliuvaitė (Lithuania, 2024).

Motivation: This is a story of broken families, teenage friendships, and the hope for a better tomorrow. The film shows the contrast between youthful dreams full of hope and excitement and

a real world that exploits those adolescent ideals for its benefit. It raises important questions such as how to choose the right path to follow, how to distinguish between truth and lies in human relationships, and how to say no to manipulation and abuse, especially when you do not yet have life experiences. What does today’s society offer young people?

In addition, the Jury awarded a Commendation to *Mond* (Moon) directed by Kurdwin Ayub (Austria, 2024).

Motivation: There are always defeats in life but it is important to get up and start over again. This film provides a societal contrast and also a strong commonality between a young European female trainer and her new pupils, three Jordanian sisters. The feeling of being trapped and of fighting for freedom can occur in both the East and the West.

Members of the 2024 Jury: Douglas Fahleson (President of the Jury, Ireland); Maria Teresa Téramo (Argentina); Anita Uzulniece (Latvia). Dirk von Jutrczenka (Germany)

Miskolc (Hungary) 2024

At the 20th Cinefest – International Film Festival Miskolc (6-14 September 2024), the Ecumenical Jury, appointed by INTERFILM and SIGNIS, awarded its Prize to *Elskling* (Loveable) directed by Lilja Ingólfsdóttir (Norway, 2024).

Motivation: This family drama begins as an enchantment, but a few years later the family gradually cracks, and the mother, Maria, through whom the problems arrive, doesn’t understand why. She clashes with her husband, children and her mother. Everyone is guilty. We follow her in a painful path from her guilt and fears to her attempt at self-knowledge and the realization of unconscious patterns in herself.

After a long personal journey and with the help of a psychologist, resilience comes and she discovers the possibility of faith, hope and love

in her life. *Loveable* also addresses the themes of equality and femininity. The film's fragmented narrative is in perfect harmony with its themes. The playful use of montage and the non-linear storytelling makes it not only a deep human study, but also a remarkable piece of contemporary cinema.

Members of the 2024 Jury: Jacqueline Barbaccia (France); Philippe Cabrol (France); Pál Gerlai (Hungary, President of the Jury); Balász Szövényi-Lux (Hungary).

Chemnitz (Germany) 2024

At the 29th International Film Festival for Children and Young Audience SCHLiNGEL, 25 September to 3 October 2024, the Ecumenical Jury, appointed by INTERFILM and SIGNIS, awarded its Prize to *Hajjan* directed by Abu Bakr Shawky (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, 2023).

Motivation: This film left us speechless: The impressive landscape images, the poetry of the language, the emotionality of the music and the masterful use of light paired with the captivating story about the young orphan Matar were overwhelming. The Bedouin Matar stands out for his sense of justice and his high ethical standards in a merciless environment full of vanity and injustice. The absolute prioritisation of the welfare of his companion, the camel Hofira, and the appreciation of his family history characterise the actions of this excellent jockey. No money in the world, no prospect of victories and successes interest him, but only the peaceful, respectful coexistence with Hofira, for whom he himself would give his life. At the same time, we were able to immerse ourselves in a culture that is completely foreign to us and learn about its values, family structures and traditions.

In addition, the jury awarded a Commem-

oration to *La Petite et le Vieux* (Blue Sky Jo) (still below) directed by Patrice Sauvé (Canada, 2024).

Motivation: This film takes us on a journey into the world of the 80s in French-speaking Canada. Tough economic constraints, failed dreams and broken family relationships determine people's reality. Nevertheless, compassion finds its way: the old man who protects the main character Jo like an angel. Her job colleague, who helps without expecting anything in return. And the young Jo herself, who is constantly confronted with the shortcomings of adulthood as she grows up. But she is never discouraged from looking for the good in people for her own small happiness and helping selflessly. This is a good example to follow.

Members of the 2024 Jury: Mathieu Cunnac (France); Stefan Hassels (Germany); Beáta Kézi (Hungary, President of the Jury); Michelle Isabel Stark (Germany).



Warsaw (Poland) 2024

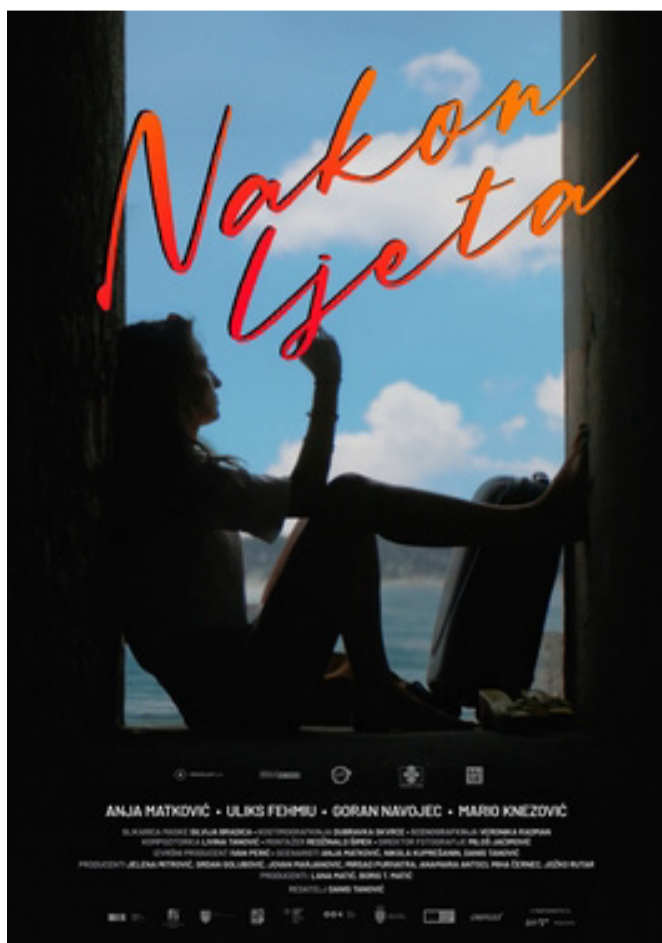
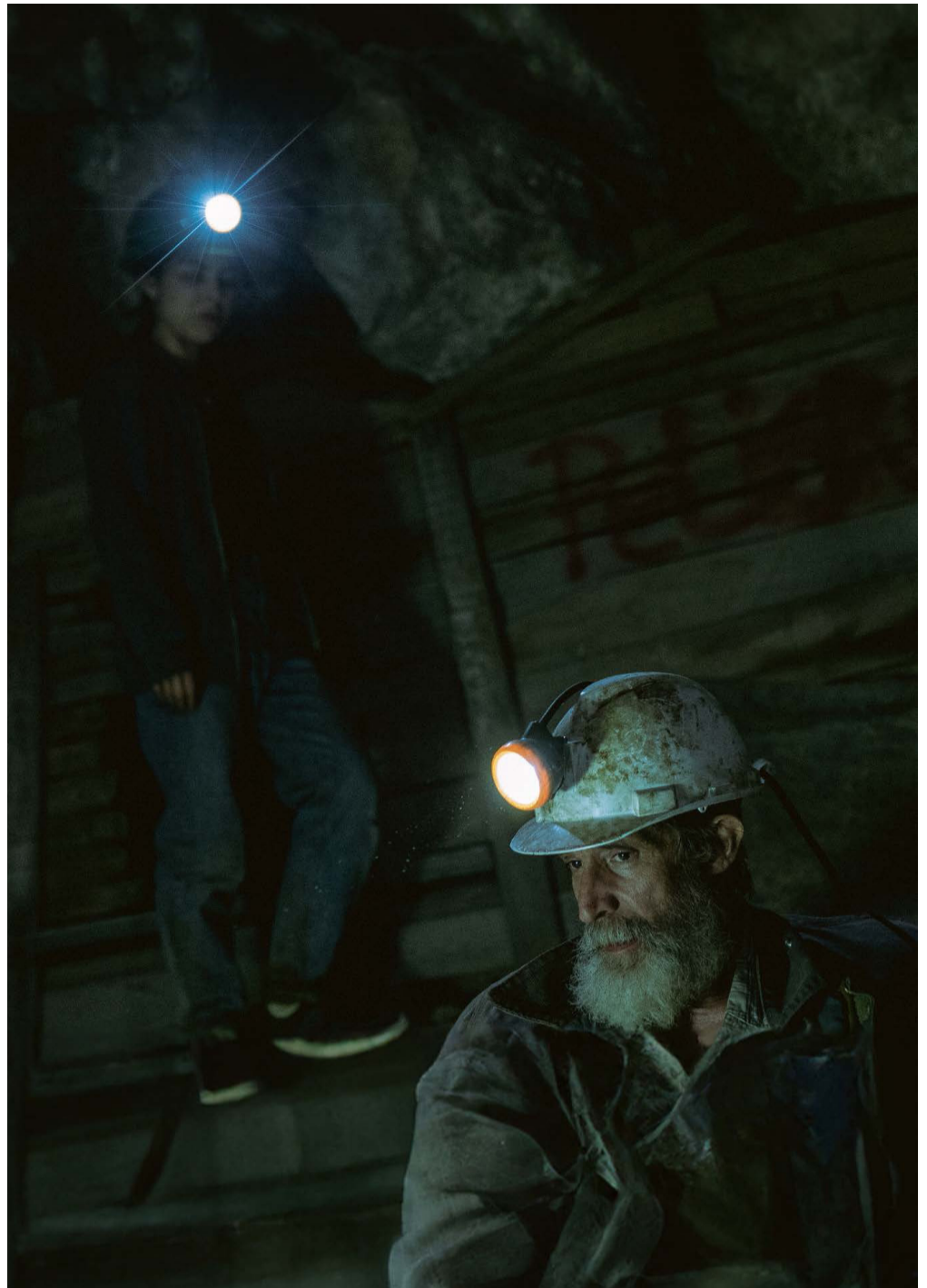
At the 40th Warsaw International Film Festival 11-20 October 2024, the Ecumenical Jury, appointed by INTERFILM and SIGNIS,

awarded its Prize for a film in the International Competition to *Oro amargo* (Bitter Gold) (still right) directed by Juan Francisco Olea (Chile Mexico, Uruguay, Germany, 2024).

Motivation: Still keep the hope, even if it is hopeless! Sometimes the worst tragedies can become opportunities for profound transformations. Carola, a young woman in North Chile, decides to take her life in her hands, and fight against the patriarchal structures and brutal laws of the jungle. Like a resurrection, she descends to the depths of hell to emerge stronger and increase a self-empowerment which become the key to a new life. Through magnificent landscapes and a tense drama, the director allows us to perceive that in the face of the impossible, hope remains.

In addition, the Ecumenical Jury awarded a Commendation to *Nakon ljeta* (My Late Summer) directed by Denis Tanović (Croatia, Bosnia, Romania, Slovenia, Serbia, 2024).

Motivation: It's a celebration of life where the Oscar winning director, Danis Tanović, invites everyone to enjoy the Cro-



atian flair by colours, music, nature and fabulous people. Both entertaining and poignantly scripted, the film centres on Maja who travels to a remote island determined to get answers to questions about her past – and to get a piece of the inheritance she feels is rightfully hers. While her personal mission takes longer than expected, the charming island, its eccentric inhabitants and an unexpected romance help her focus on her identity and ambitions and rethink her life.

Members of the 2024 Jury: Anna Woźniak-Kot (Poland); Jean-Luc Gadreau (France); Marianna Kavka (Ukraine/Germany). ■