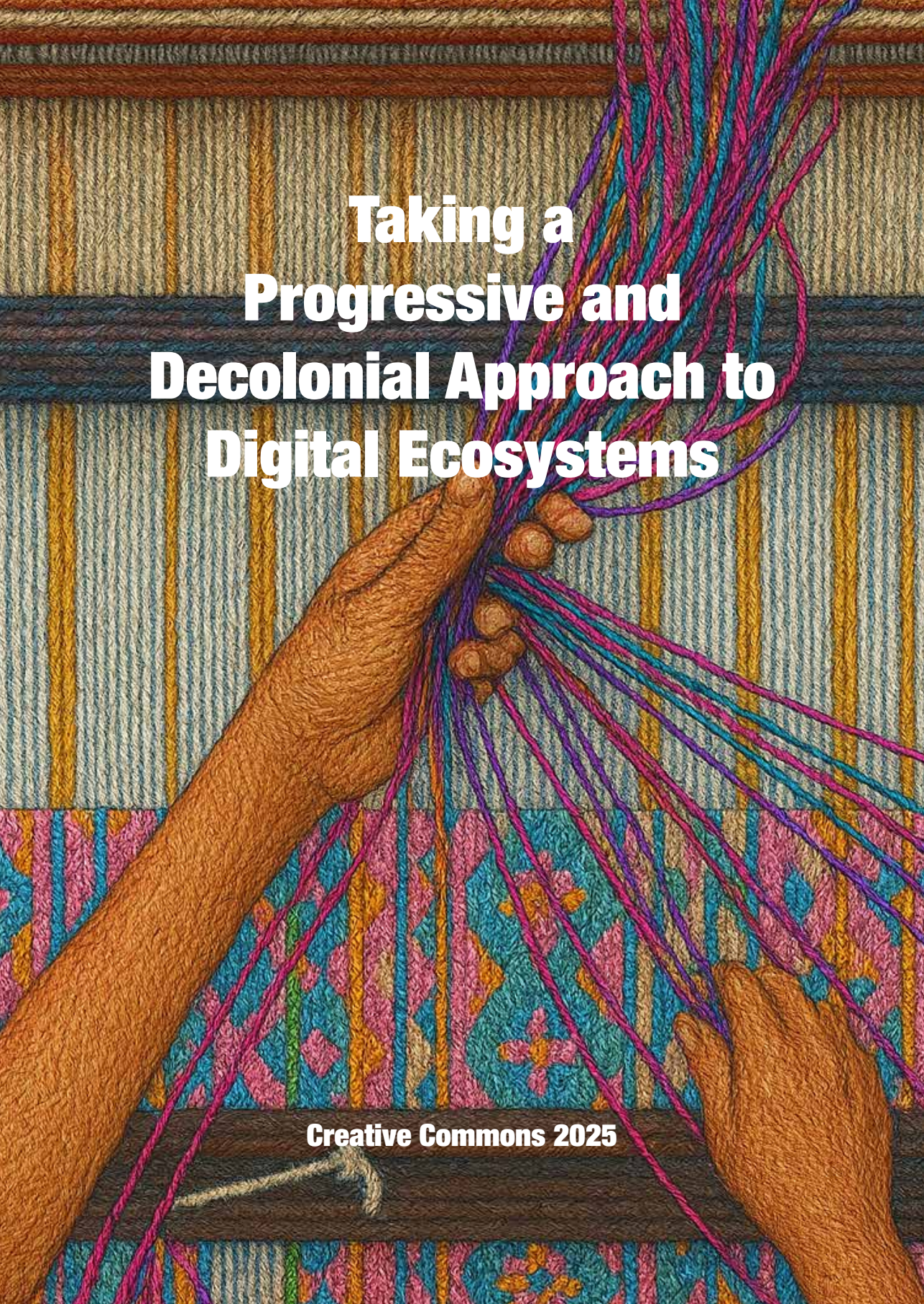

Taking a Progressive and Decolonial Approach to Digital Ecosystems

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Taking a Progressive and Decolonial Approach to Digital Ecosystems.

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WACC is an international civil society organization that promotes communication as a human right. 80 Hayden Street. Toronto, Ontario, M4Y 3C, Canada.

Lead authors: Clemencia Rodriguez (Colombia/USA), Seán Ó Siochrú (Ireland), Parminder Jeet Singh (India)
Production and editing: Philip Lee (United Kingdom/Canada) and Lorenzo Vargas (Colombia/Canada)
Layout and graphics:Jonathan Reina (Colombia)
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PREFACE

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 and inclusive societies.

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; and Enhance international governance of artificial intelligence for the benefit of humanity.

However, from WACC's perspective, communication rights, independent media, and the need to tackle the immense concentration of media and digital power in actors more interested in generating profits than in advancing the public interest were largely absent 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.

In response to these shortcomings, civil society organisations- WACC included- are now planning to intervene at the UN World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) +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. 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 reliable information.

It is in this context that WACC is publishing this position paper providing context as well as inviting broader civil society to embrace communication rights as the building blocks of a progressive and transformational digital society in which social movements working on the critical issues of today, such as gender equality and climate justice, have the platforms and resources to influence public debate and ultimately advance positive social change.

Philip Lee
General Secretary, WACC

INTRODUCTION

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.


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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 marketplace? 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.


CREATION
– NOT
FOR

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.

4

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. Rumblings 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 go-

vernment 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 architect 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 had expressed an in-

terest 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 glo-

bal 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 struggling to envisage what the future might bring.

6


x250.1
x250.1

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, commercial 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.


JUST
JUSTICE
Camera 2
JUSTICE
Camera 3
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POPCORN

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 ex-

pression, 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

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:

1. 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.

2. 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.

3. Media, computing, digital platforms, data, and AI must be made available as public utilities, and cannot be regarded solely or primarily as commodities.

4. 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.

5. 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.

6. 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.

7. 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.

8. 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.

9. 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.

10. AI-based interactions, artifacts and products 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.

11. 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: chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/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.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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.

ABOUT WACC

WACC is an international non-governmental organisation that for over fifty years has specialised in the democratisation of media, information, and communications. Today, we promote the communication rights of peoples and communities throughout the world to help achieve social change and to improve lives and livelihoods.

WACC plays a pivotal role in advancing communication justice for all by advocating for, and enabling, meaningful, equitable access to digital technologies; fostering informed and inclusive communication environments; and enabling local and marginalized communities to take control of their own communication ecosystems.

At the global level, WACC has a highly regarded track record as a leading actor in communication research, capacity building and advocacy. This includes a social media monitoring methodology to build evidence on tech-facilitated gender-based violence, and digital literacy resources. WACC is also part of civil society digital justice coalitions working to challenge the status quo of digital communication ecosystems.

WACC's work supports individuals and groups at the local level to take practical steps to strengthen communication justice in their own communities as well as contribute to positive change in government and media policies. Through such initiatives, WACC promotes critical media literacy, counters digital discrimination, and empowers diverse voices. Our strategic partnerships and grassroots focus amplify the importance of digital rights as fundamental human rights. Through this unique combination of approaches, networks and expertise, WACC's work contributes significantly to creating a more just and equitable global digital landscape.

WACC is unique in its holistic approach to communication rights, intertwining ethical, cultural, and social justice dimensions. WACC leverages its global network in more than 50 countries to address communication issues from a comprehensive rights-based perspective, advocating for justice, peace, and the dignity of all people. Its emphasis on inclusive communication ensures that marginalized communities – including those most affected by climate impacts- have a voice, promoting not just access but also meaningful participation in media and digital spaces. This distinct blend of advocacy, ethical grounding, and local and global reach positions WACC as a leading actor in realising universal communication rights and can help ensure that local are the centre of the climate conversation rather than an afterthought.

PHOTOGRAPHS

1: A woman operates a traditional loom to weave cloth in Kalay, a town in Myanmar.
Photo by Paul Jeffrey /Life on Earth.

2: Nelly on her way to work.
Photo by Clemência Rodriguez.

3: 6 December 2019, Madrid, Spain: Shana Rose shouts her heart out in a cry for climate justice, as thousands upon thousands of people march through the streets of central Madrid as part of a public contribution to the United Nations climate meeting COP25, urging decision-makers to take action for climate justice. [Image captured on assignment for the Lutheran World Federation, whose member churches and partners can use it free of charge to report about the LWF's work, with credit to 'LWF/Albin Hillert' upon publication.]
Photo By Albin Hillert /Life on Earth.

4: Sonia Elizabeth Paz migrated north from her home in Honduras but later lost contact with her family back home. On December 17, 2013, she was discovered in Puerto Madero by a group of Central American mothers who'd come to Mexico to search for loved ones who had disappeared on the migrant trail north. Here, as the media watches and listens, she talks by phone to a sister back home in Honduras after being found.
Photo by Paul Jeffrey /Life on Earth.

5: Indigenous Maya Chortí man and woman, Reina and Julio, operate a video camera in Copán, Honduras. Both were taking part in an indigenous communication group linked to the National Indigenous Chorti Council of Honduras.
Photo by Sean Hawkey /Life on Earth.

6: Carisa Aquilar takes a photo of herself and other Methodists in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, after they served food to Cuban immigrants in that city's Plaza Benito Juarez on March 3, 2017. Hundreds of Cubans are stuck in the border city, caught in limbo by the elimination in January of the infamous "wet foot, dry foot" policy of the United States. They are not allowed to enter the U.S. yet don't want to return to Cuba. Many of the city's churches have become temporary shelters for the immigrants, and congregations rotate responsibility for feeding the Cubans, who have slowly been forced to appreciate Mexican cuisine. Such solidarity from ordinary Mexicans is being tested these days, as not only are the Cubans stuck at the border, but the U.S. has stepped up deportations of Mexican nationals, while at the same time detaining many undocumented workers from other nations and simply dumping them on the US-Mexico border. Aguilar is a member of the Aposento Alto Methodist Church in Nuevo Laredo.
Photo by Paul Jeffrey /Life on Earth.

7: 13 September 2021, Berlin, Germany: An international symposium on Social Justice in a Digital Age is held in Berlin, Germany. Co-organised by the World Council of Churches and World Association for Christian Communication, the event brings together research, experiences from different regions and marginalized communities, expert input on economic and political trends, and ethical and theological reflection as a contribution to the WCC 11th Assembly in September 2022.
Photo By Albin Hillert /Life on Earth.

8: 15 September 2021, Berlin, Germany: An international symposium on Social Justice in a Digital Age is held in Berlin, Germany. Co-organised by the World Council of Churches and World Association for Christian Communication, the event brings together

research, experiences from different regions and marginalized communities, expert input on economic and political trends, and ethical and theological reflection as a contribution to the WCC 11th Assembly in September 2022. Here, a video animation on the topic of 'Vision for the future'.
Photo By Albin Hillert /Life on Earth.

9: 6 December 2017, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire: Zainab (left) from Côte d'Ivoire takes orders, as a food truck, named "Bon Appetit" parked near the Global Village provides food to participants in ICASA 2017. The 19th International Conference on AIDS and STIs in Africa (ICASA) 2017 gathers thousands of researchers, medical professionals, academics, activists and faith-based organizations from all over the world, all looking to overcome the HIV epidemic and eliminate AIDS as a public health threat.
Photo By Albin Hillert /Life on Earth.

10: 19 August 2017, Sibiu, Romania: Gathering in Sibiu, Romania, the World Council of Churches youth commission ECHOS met on 17-20 August for days of discernment on the position and role of youth in the ecumenical movement today, and to set the future path of the commission, as it journeys on the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace. On 19 August, the group visited the Sibiu Lutheran Cathedral. Here, Larissa from Brazil (far left), Celina Falk from Sweden (left), Dianet (right) and Rhee Hanbeet (far right) taking a group selfie outside the cathedral.
Photo By Albin Hillert/Life on Earth.

11: Melania Itto, the program manager of Radio Bakhita, hosts the morning "Juba Sunrise" program in the station's studio in Juba, the capital of Southern Sudan. NOTE: In July 2011 Southern Sudan became the independent country of South Sudan.
Photo by Paul Jeffrey /Life on Earth.

12: Young women hold hands during a team-building exercise in a health training centre, Pondicherry.
Photo by Sean Hawkey /Life on Earth.

13: People in Seduya gathered to watch a film on a battery-powered DVD player on an upturned pestle. There is no electricity in this remote area.

The small village of Seduya, Koinadugu is in a remote district of Kabala province, in northern Sierra Leone, an area heavily affected by the civil war in the 1990s. Working with partner Christian Extension Services, World Renew is helping the village with agricultural trainining to improve harvests and with sanitation and clean water supply.
Photo by Sean Hawkey /Life on Earth.

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