Media Development

4/2026

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EDITORIAL

"Cultural sovereignty refers to the right of a nation or community to preserve, develop, and govern its own culture and identity without external domination. It extends the traditional idea of state sovereignty beyond territory, law, and politics into the realm of values, language, art, religion, and ways of living. A state may control its borders perfectly well yet still find its citizens absorbing foreign values through screens and digital platforms that no checkpoint can stop" (PolSci Institute).

This statement rings all the more true in the context of information and communication ecosystems, where checkpoints (effective oversight and regulation) are few and far between. And cultural sovereignty today is increasingly being held to ransom by technological globalization (motivated by the endless drive for profits), together with the continued political and economic subversion of the Majority World by the Minority World. The recent furore over Artificial Intelligence (AI) is fuelled in part by its autocratic potential for domination and control of peoples and markets, and its exponential capacity for grabbing data.

Fortunately, digital technologies and AI can be used to fight back, provided that communities and nations are able to innovate and deploy them on their own terms. Such a form of governance could upset the applecarts of Big Tech by establishing local communication ecosystems that are independent and culturally embedded. As Kersti Ruth Wissenbach argues in her article in this issue of *Media Development*:

> "Communities must be authors, builders, and decisionmakers of the systems that carry their voices, not passive recipients of systems designed for them by others. Cultural integrity, understood as the capacity of communities to sustain and develop their own cultural forms, languages, and knowledge systems, is not an aspiration to be added onto digital inclusion strategies but constitutes the precondition of genuine communication justice, and therefore of genuine digital justice."

Much work has been carried out in Nigeria, Mexico, Indonesia and elsewhere to promote community-centred connectivity as well as contributing to an enabling ecosystem for its emergence and growth. In this regard, local governance is crucial as Waqar Rizvi underlines in his article in this issue of *Media Development*. He identifies five questions that would help distinguish community governance from mere community-facing language (paying lip service to the notion) and thus strengthen cultural sovereignty:

> "Who sets the priorities tells us where a project begins. Who owns it tells us what remains when a donor or contractor leaves. Where decision-making authority sits tells us who can change course. External dependencies show where that authority may still be constrained. Accountability tells us whether the people holding power, international or local, can themselves be challenged."

At the heart of this debate lies the notion that communication rights are an essential and integral part of both digital justice and equitable social progress. Some commentators seem not to understand this or, if they do, to cloud the issue with all kinds of caveats. Yet, communication justice demands democratic equality; it demands the removal of historical bias and cultural dominance; it demands respect for the human dignity of all peoples everywhere.

It is worth recalling the 1980 MacBride Report, officially titled *Many Voices, One World* and commissioned by UNESCO to analyze global communication problems and media imbalances between developed and developing nations. In relation to cultural sovereignty, the report's concerns and recommendations – transferred to today's digitalization of societies – remain pertinent:

> "Cultural identity is endangered by the overpowering influence on and assimilation of

some national cultures though these nations may well be the heirs to more ancient and richer cultures… [I]t will often be necessary to protect and strengthen the threatened culture, develop communication at a local level, and open up alternative forms of communication as an antidote to the pressure of the big media. It should be stressed, too, that the problem does not arise solely in the relationships between one nation and another; often, it takes its sharpest form and presents the most pressing dangers within nations whose population includes cultural minorities" (p. 31).

Shaping a democratic digital future demands the kind of cultural sovereignty that allows the preservation, development, and government of communities' own cultures and identities in parity with others and without external domination. As Agostina Coniglio states in her article in this issue of *Media Development:*

"From this perspective, cultural integrity acquires a vital dimension of agency. Beyond preserving traditions, knowledge, or identities in the face of digitization, we must retain and exercise the capacity for self-determination throughout the process itself. This means acting as authors of our own digital transformation – not merely taking part in it, but retaining the leverage to shape its trajectory. Ultimately, we must ask ourselves, what kind of data-relational society do we truly want to build? One that expands the exercise of our rights into the digital realm, or one that ends up restricting and conditioning them?" ■

The breath that gives life to culture: Why digital justice needs communication justice

Kersti Ruth Wissenbach

In September 2024, the United Nations adopted the Global Digital Compact (GDC), its most comprehensive framework to date for governing the digital future. The document calls for ensuring that digital technologies and AI are used responsibly and benefit all, addressing the digital divide and fostering a safe and inclusive digital environment. It is a significant commitment. It is also, in important ways, a familiar one, and this familiarity is part of the problem.

For decades, the dominant framing of digital governance has been organised around access, safety, and inclusion. More connectivity, better regulation, safer environments. These are real and pressing concerns, but they consistently leave the architecture of digital systems intact and ask communities to adapt to a world as it has been designed rather than shape it according to their own needs, values, and knowledge systems. As the Association for Progressive Communications underlined in its contribution to the WSIS+20 review process, the emphasis needs to be on harnessing of digital tools to support people-centred development rather than the de-

velopment of digital tools and processes (APC, 2026). The distinction matters but has been consistently blurred.

This article argues that the infrastructure bias in dominant digital governance discourse has a history, and that recovering that history, with specific attention to the MacBride Commission's 1980 report *Many Voices, One World* and the decades-long struggle for the *right to communicate* it represented, is both a political and analytical necessity. It re-attributes argument for a communication versus information framework as a digital justice requirement. Its absence from current digital governance forums risks sustaining a tech-solutionist bias that prevents digital justice from becoming what it should be: an expression of cultural justice grounded in communication justice.

Cultural justice is communication justice

Communication, unlike the causal character of information, seeks to produce reciprocity, shared decisions, unprogrammed response, intrinsically binding it to the essence of community and human relations (Pasquali, 1963). Assessing digital justice through a communication justice lens therefore requires asking what model of human relations a given infrastructure, and its governing frameworks, tends to support. This distinction has been consistently submerged in digital policy discourse, where the terms communication and information are used interchangeably in ways that privilege the latter since communication processes have historically been viewed as separate from the devices or methods people use (Lievrouw, 2011). The result is what might be called a disproportionate media-as-infrastructure perspective that evaluates digital systems by what they transmit rather than by the quality of relations from which they emerge or which they foster.

Justice therefore requires attention to human relations[1] as the ground from which transformation must grow. Culture does not emerge from access to tools, content, or platforms, but from people being in active relation with and within reality, through what Freire called acts of creation, re-creation, and decision. Where communication is understood as dialogue, a relational act oriented towards mutual awareness, reflection, and action, it becomes the *breath that gives life to culture* (Freire, 1970). Without such dialogue, participation gives way to what he called cultural silencing: communities whose voices are not absent but suppressed, not voiceless but silenced (Freire, 1979). Cultural justice and communication justice are therefore intrinsically intertwined, making communication justice a foundation of digital justice.

Digital justice and the priority of human relations

Today's digital landscape reproduces structural parallels with the media order of the past: dominated by a small number of platform corporations whose algorithmic systems encode particular languages, epistemologies, and models of human relations as defaults. The shift from broadcasting monopolies to algorithmic control, data extraction, and AI-mediated knowledge systems has created new forms of silencing. The distinction between not having a voice and voices being silenced matters because it shifts the question from how to include people in systems designed elsewhere to what conditions are necessary for people to be authors of the systems through which they communicate.

What is required is an ontological shift, from media and digital infrastructure to human relational needs as the given from which analysis and policy must depart. Technology serves cultural justice only where it responds to the communicative needs of specific communities and ecosystems in their contexts. Digital justice cannot be achieved through infrastructural logic alone but requires infrastructure to become subordinate to cultural integrity. Communication justice, understood as the capacity to speak in one's own language, express one's perspectives, and exercise genuine democratic agency in shaping and governing communication infrastructures as shared

commons, must thus become a driving force of digital governance.

Applied to digital systems, this means asking not only whether communities have connectivity but whether the systems through which they communicate enable reciprocity, shared decision-making, and cultural self-determination, or reproduce dependencies and exclusions that characterised the global media order. The answer, in the current moment of platform capitalism and AI-driven knowledge systems, is largely the latter.

The representation of only a handful of the 7,613 documented languages in major AI systems, for example, does not simply indicate a connectivity gap but demonstrates the structural exclusion of cultural diversity at a scale and speed unprecedented in the history of communication (UNESCO, 2025). This echoes the structural logic that the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems identified in the MacBride Report, in a different technological context, in 1980 (Mansell and Nordenstreng, 2006; UNESCO, 1980). Closing the connectivity gap while leaving the epistemic gap intact simply gives more people access to a system that does not challenge agency and ownership structures.

Many Voices, One World: arguments that have not expired

The MacBride Report is remembered, where it is remembered at all, as a document of its time, an episode in a Cold War-era political battle over media ownership and information flows that ended badly when the United States and United Kingdom withdrew from UNESCO in 1984 and 1985. Whilst this reading is accurate as history, it is misleading as analysis. The core arguments of *Many Voices, One World* have not expired but have been repeatedly vindicated by the very technological transformations that were supposed to make them obsolete. Its early warning against the disproportionate emphasis on technological advances at the expense of the critical roles of meaning-making and cultural justice has not found equal attention since, not even in the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) process, whose targets remain heavily focused on technology (Mansell and Nordenstreng, 2006).

The MacBride Commission's foundational argument was that communication is a human right, not a commodity to be distributed according to purchasing power or geopolitical influence, but a condition of human dignity and cultural agency. This distinction between communication as right and communication as service or infrastructure is precisely the one that the GDC fails to make. By framing digital justice primarily as a question of responsible use and equitable access, it positions communication systems as neutral utilities to be distributed more fairly, rather than as political and cultural architectures whose design embodies particular power relations and whose governance determines whose cultures, languages, and knowledge systems are sustained or erased.

The Commission went further. It distinguished between access to communication and the right to communicate, which includes the right to produce, transmit, and govern communication on one's own terms. This implies that communities must be authors, builders, and decision-makers of the systems that carry their voices, not passive recipients of systems designed for them by others. Cultural integrity, understood as the capacity of communities to sustain and develop their own cultural forms, languages, and knowledge systems, is not an aspiration to be added onto digital inclusion strategies but constitutes the precondition of genuine communication justice, and therefore of genuine digital justice.

The Commission also made a structural critique that remains essential. Global communication inequality is not only the product of insufficient infrastructure investment. It is produced by the concentration of ownership and control over communication systems in the hands of a minority of actors whose interests are neither plural nor local. In 1980, this meant Western broadcasting corporations and news agencies. Although the report has been critiqued for not sufficiently re-

cognising that the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) would likely be the order of transnational cooperation (Hamelink, 1980), its structural concerns are visible today in a handful of platform corporations and AI developers shaping the epistemic landscape from the outside in. Whilst the mechanisms have changed, the structure has not.

The MacBride Report was a historic milestone precisely because it articulated the structural conditions of communication inequality rather than treating them as technical problems with technical solutions (Nordenstreng, 2010). The agenda for a NWICO that it proposed was not, at its core, a demand for more infrastructure but a demand for democratic governance of communication systems, for what would now be called communication sovereignty. That demand has been progressively stripped from digital governance discourse as the infrastructure logic has reasserted itself, first through the WSIS process and now through the GDC.

The infrastructure logic and the memory it suppresses

The transition from the NWICO debates of the 1980s to the digital governance forums of today has been accompanied by a systematic forgetting of the communication rights framework those debates produced. As Hamelink (2015) has argued, the question for digital governance is not whether we are building an information society but whether we are building a communication society, one in which the conditions for genuine dialogue, cultural self-determination, and democratic participation in the governance of communication systems are actively cultivated. This includes the urgent question of civic ownership through a commons lens, which has been consistently displaced by the more tractable question of how to extend access to systems. The analytical frameworks shaping digital governance discourse have consistently fallen short of providing the conceptual grounds for a genuine communication justice approach.

This is not only a political failure but also an intellectual one, rooted in the disciplinary separation between communication studies and the fields that dominate digital governance debates. Despite the cultural turn in the social sciences, the field of social movement studies, and its media practice work rooted in media studies, has struggled to fully embrace the distinction between communication as a relational practice and communication as a mediated infrastructure. The gap has limited its capacity to contribute a communication justice framework to digital governance debates (Wissenbach, 2019). The data justice discourse offers a route back to participatory traditions by situating data within broader social and economic justice claims. Whilst the structural move echoes what a communication justice framework would need to make against digital governance's infrastructure logic, it is also departs from the data lifecycle (Dencik et al. 2016, 2019). The strongest echo of communication tradition emphasises that justice claims must be grounded in situated, not universal, standpoints (Milan and Treré, 2019).

What the MacBride framework requires of digital justice today

If the intrinsic connection between communication justice and cultural justice is taken seriously as the foundation of digital justice, several things follow.

Community-centred communication infrastructures, including community internet networks, locally owned mobile operators, community media organisations, and community data initiatives that keep governance in local hands are models of what democratic communication infrastructure looks like when it is designed from the inside out. The MacBride Commission's call for strengthening national and local media capacity to avoid dependency on external sources remains as relevant for community infrastructure initiatives today as it was for community radio in 1980. These initiatives require systematic investment and policy frameworks that treat communication sovereignty as a legitimate governance goal.

The question of epistemic and linguistic justice in AI is an urgent contemporary expression of the MacBride agenda. The encoding of particular knowledge systems and languages into AI models at the expense of others is not a technical oversight to be addressed through diversity initiatives. It is a structural reproduction of the epistemic exclusion the Commission diagnosed, the silencing of cultural forms that do not conform to the dominant communication order. Advocacy entry points exist at the GDC follow-up, the Internet Governance Forum (IGF), and WSIS processes, but they require a communication rights framing that connects AI governance to the longer history of the struggle for cultural self-determination, rather than treating it as a novel problem generated by new technology.

Lastly, it requires a shift in how the success of digital justice initiatives is evaluated. The question of success must be defined by communities themselves, by what they identify as enabling genuine communication and cultural expression on their own terms, rather than by funders' metrics or political agendas that measure connectivity, user numbers, or content volumes.

Conclusion

The argument of this article is not that technology is irrelevant to cultural or communication justice. It is that the intrinsic interrelation between communication justice and cultural justice must be re-centred if digital justice is to move beyond stagnant, infrastructure-led narratives. Revisiting the demands advanced by the MacBride Commission does not simply expose the structural amnesia of digital governance discourse; it brings a longstanding communication-rights framework back into current debates on digital and AI governance. The structural conditions of communication injustice have been known, named, and theorised for over four decades. What is missing is not the diagnosis, but its place in current governance responses.

The struggle for the right to communicate has been upheld since by communicators, activists, and scholars whose work provides an analytical framework for current digital justice debates. Recovering *Many Voices, One World* as a living resource for digital justice debates and reconnecting those debates with the communication rights scholarship that followed, is a political act. It matters as a way of challenging the tech-solutionist bias that continues to shape digital governance. It shifts the focus from communities as beneficiaries of digital inclusion to communities as authors of the communication systems through which they constitute their cultural lives.

Digital justice without communication justice is structurally incomplete. Communication justice, understood as the capacity of communities to speak in their own languages, from their own knowledge systems, within communication infrastructures they have a genuine role in shaping and governing, is the foundation from which digital justice must be built. The breath that gives life to culture is communication. That was the argument in 1980, and it remains the argument now. ▪

Note

1. In fact, justice requires urgent attention to human and more-than-human relations. An ecological attention is urgent and addressed in other bodies of work. Due to the framework of the special issue, I will not elaborate this urgency and required pathways here.

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Who gets to change the brief?

Waqar Rizvi

Community-led technology is easy to claim while everyone agrees. The harder test comes when local knowledge says the plan is wrong.

As a journalist, I have always disliked the logic of parachute journalism: arrive with the story already half-formed, gather a few local voices, file, and leave. The problem is not that outsiders report on places they do not come from. Some of the best journalism crosses borders. The problem begins when the people closest to a reality are useful mainly as sources, while somebody farther away keeps the authority to decide what that reality means.

International development has spent years trying to move away from its own version of that habit. The vocabulary has certainly improved. Projects are now "locally led", "community-centred", "participatory" and "context-sensitive". Yet a local organisation can deliver the programme, employ local staff and maintain trusted relationships while the problem, budget, timetable and measures of success have already been settled somewhere else.

Technology projects can reproduce the same arrangement. A community may supply the context, data, labour and legitimacy while somebody elsewhere still defines the problem and decides which objections count. So the distinction that matters is not participation versus exclusion. It is the difference between being heard and having enough authority to change something.

A study of humanitarian localisation in Yemen, published in Development in Practice in August 2026, captures the frustration well. Researchers from the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies quote one representative of a Yemeni local non-governmental organisation: "Localisa-

tion in Yemen has evolved over time, but real authority has not necessarily shifted. Everyone uses the word, but the same structures stay in place."[1] When local knowledge says the original plan is wrong, what are local people actually allowed to change?

When local leadership stops at delivery

The Yemen study found local organisations doing much of the implementation, including in difficult and insecure settings, while important decisions over programme design, budgets and compliance remained elsewhere. Another local representative described the relationship with international organisations as being treated "as subcontractors rather than as true partners".[1] Short grant cycles, limited recovery of overhead costs, demanding reporting requirements and strict audits shifted substantial operational and compliance burdens onto local organisations while restricting investment in their own staff and systems. Domestic authorities added another layer of constraints through registrations, permits and approvals.[1]

The researchers call part of this pattern "risk-transfer lock-in". The phrase is technical, but the mechanism is not. Weak access to flexible or core funding can stop a local organisation from building the systems international partners say it needs; the same capacity gap can then be cited as a reason for withholding larger, more flexible or more autonomous roles. An organisation can become highly experienced at delivering somebody else's programme without gaining much more power over the programme itself.[1]

Yemen also prevents an easy North-versus-South morality tale. Local authorities can hoard power; local organisations can be hierarchical; international partners sometimes insist on safeguards that vulnerable people genuinely need. The problem is not the passport of the person holding authority. It is whether that authority can be questioned. Local staff, local offices and local-language materials matter, but they still do not tell us who can alter the brief.

Who gets to be the expert?

The imbalance can begin before a programme has a budget or beneficiary list, with a quieter question: whose knowledge is treated as knowledge? A 2022 study by Humanitarian Advisory Group, Pakistan-based GLOW Consultants, CoLAB and inSights looked at whose work humanitarian research cites. In the documents it reviewed, 95% of cited references came from Global North institutions, 3% from Global South institutions and 2% from joint North-South work. The researchers stressed that their sample was limited, but the imbalance was striking.[2]

The study also found Global South actors more often treated as sources of primary data than as authors, analysts or designers of research frameworks. A collaborator from Bangladesh put it plainly: "We cannot be a researcher until we get the proper recognition or authorship for the publication."[2] Being asked what you know is not the same as being trusted to decide what the knowledge means.

For me, this is where the old "West knows best" instinct can survive without anyone saying the words aloud. One kind of knowledge arrives already recognised as expertise; another arrives as "local context". That does not make Global North knowledge inherently suspect, or Global South knowledge automatically right. The same hierarchy can be reproduced locally too. The better test is whether local knowledge can alter a consequential decision.

AI can widen capability without shifting power

That question has become harder to ignore as artificial intelligence enters development and humanitarian work. Research published in September 2026 by Pakistan-based GLOW Consultants and Humanitarian Advisory Group documents local humanitarian organisations in Pakistan using AI for reports, proposals, analysis, translation and communication. The benefits are real: these tools can make organisations faster and more capable participants in the humanitar-

ian system.[3]

The report's conclusion is blunt: artificial intelligence "does not, on its own, shift the power, resources and decision-making needed to advance localisation."[3] That is easy to miss because capability is visible. A better proposal, faster analysis or more polished report looks like progress, and often is. But an organisation can become excellent at navigating a system without gaining much say over what the system funds, which risks it accepts, how success is measured or what happens when local judgement conflicts with the original design.

Technical safeguards are part of the answer, not a substitute for transparency, contextual knowledge and accountable human judgement. But that still leaves a basic governance question. A person can review an AI output and still have no authority to change the rule behind it. A community can be consulted about a technology without having a meaningful say over how it is used. "Human in the loop" is not the same thing as community at the controls.

In practice, the governance questions are fairly ordinary. Who decided that AI was the right tool in the first place? Who can reject an output that conflicts with knowledge on the ground? Who can suspend its use when circumstances change? Who controls the data afterwards? If a technical specialist overrules a community objection, who has to explain that decision, and to whom? A system can answer every technical-safety question correctly and still leave all consequential authority somewhere else.

A village where the plan could move

Cenrana, a small village in South Sulawesi, Indonesia, offers a useful contrast. Commercial providers had little incentive to build the internet service the village needed, so its government used Indonesia's Dana Desa, or Village Fund, to finance a local network. The proposal went through a Musyawarah Desa, a village deliberation in which residents, community leaders and the village council discuss development priorities. A local internet service provider supplied technical advice and connectivity but held no equity in the network. The village approved the plan and budget and paid the provider as a supplier.[4]

The arrangement did not freeze once the equipment was installed. Fallen trees damaged parts of the original network, so the configuration changed. Voucher revenue later covered operating and maintenance costs, residents hosting routers or towers earned commissions, and income was reinvested. By 2025, the network was being formalised as a village asset.[4]

The detail I keep returning to is the price. Villagers wanted a better deal on internet access. The International Telecommunication Union records that pricing was negotiated with the community and that the village government adjusted the voucher offer when residents asked for lower prices.4 Nothing dramatic happened, and that is exactly why the example works. People wanted a material term changed, and the people governing the service had enough authority to change it. No distant project office had to decide whether the original design could be disturbed.

Cenrana is not proof of perfect community governance. The case study tells us much more about planning, financing and network management than about who has the strongest voice inside a village meeting, or what happens if someone wants to challenge village leadership. Those questions matter because "community" is never a single person with a single interest.

Still, the case lets us follow the authority rather than admire the label. The village helped set the priority and financed the infrastructure. The outside provider supplied expertise without owning the network. The service could be adjusted when residents wanted a change. External dependence remained, but it did not swallow every important decision. That is a more realistic model of local control than expecting communities to do everything alone.

Follow the authority

Five questions help distinguish community governance from community-facing language. They

work best as a chain rather than a checklist. Who sets the priorities tells us where a project begins. Who owns it tells us what remains when a donor or contractor leaves. Where decision-making authority sits tells us who can change course. External dependencies show where that authority may still be constrained. Accountability tells us whether the people holding power, international or local, can themselves be challenged.

Accountability is easiest to understand when it is concrete. In separate research on locally led humanitarian action, a community member in Pakistan said: "I could visit the office or I can raise concerns with some of the staff there ... I know that the feedback process is anonymous."[5] The description is modest but useful: the person knew where to go, knew concerns could be raised and believed there was some protection in doing so.

Moving authority closer to a community does not automatically make it fair. Women, younger people, people with disabilities, poorer households, minorities and anyone dependent on local institutions may not have the same practical freedom to disagree. A locally legitimate process still has to make room for challenge. Accountability can be locally intelligible: a meeting in a familiar language, a trusted complaints route, an elected committee or customary structures. The form will vary. The principle should not: being heard has to be capable of changing something.

For funders and technology partners, that means deciding some things before a disagreement happens. Which decisions can local actors change themselves? Which require joint approval? What cannot be changed, and why? That means realistic funding for overheads and organisational capacity and agreed room to move part of a budget when needs change. It also means sharing authority over major programme changes and being clear about who controls data and other assets after a project ends. The Yemen study shows why this matters: when every meaningful adjustment requires approval elsewhere, the partnership may be local in delivery while remaining external in authority.[1]

Communities also need resources to participate seriously. Translation, transport, accessible meetings, childcare, independent advice and the time required to understand a technical proposal all cost something. A project that budgets for consultants, software and equipment but assumes community governance will arrive as free labour has already made a choice about whose time it values.

None of this means the local actor should always prevail. Donors remain accountable for the money they spend. Technical specialists sometimes know that a proposed change will not work. Local authorities can misuse power, and communities disagree among themselves. There will be occasions when saying no to a local request is justified.

What local actors need is not an automatic veto. They do need standing in the process: a recognised right to question a consequential decision, ask for reasons, bring forward evidence that can change it, and seek a remedy when the process fails. That asks more of a project than consultation does. It does not pretend that every participant should have equal authority over every decision.

The disagreement test

The five questions become most useful at the point of disagreement. I think of that as the disagreement test. When priorities stop lining up, is the decision explained? Can it be challenged? Can local evidence overturn an earlier assumption? Is there a route to remedy? Or was participation meaningful only while everyone agreed? That is the point at which participation becomes governance.

A project can do useful work without being community-governed, and there is nothing wrong with describing it accurately. What should make us uncomfortable is using the language of local leadership when local people are trusted with implementation but not with consequential disagreement.

Consultation tells us who was invited into

the room. Disagreement tells us whether they were expected to do more than agree.

When conditions change, when local knowledge contradicts the plan, or when a community wants something the funder did not anticipate, who gets to change the brief? The answer usually tells us where the power was sitting all along. ▪

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Development and the AI fallacy

Thobekile Matimbe

The current euphoria over AI adoption and deployment in Zimbabwe presents a particular impression of artificial intelligence (AI) being the long-awaited antidote to the country's development problems, escalating it towards its Sustainable Development Goals. Zimbabwe's National AI Strategy – launched in March 2026 – echoes a strong mantra of AI for Development, with the call for all entrepreneurs to rally behind the great vision. This is progressive towards increasing innovation and ensuring that the national AI strategy is locally supported by various stakeholders.

The AI strategy echoes among others "meaningful opportunities for all Zimbabweans, particularly marginalized communities, rural populations, women, youth and people with disabilities" ensuring equal access to AI education (Pillar 1) and distributed infrastructure reducing digital divides (Pillar 2), sector-specific applications prioritizing underserved populations (Pillar 3) and community-level governance structures with Ubuntu-centred ethics (Pillar 4). These are great aspirations that are reflected in policy yet lived experiences still raise concerns.

There are currently inadequate steps towards bridging digital literacy gaps to ensure the technological revolution does not leave anyone behind and this requires clear metrics, an implementation plan and follow through. The vision for development is every African country's dream, but development for whom? Various critical sectors, such as health, education and agriculture,

are seen as requiring the magic AI wand that will change livelihoods for the greater good. Fact or fiction?

That is the million-dollar question, as the greater part of the country's rural population is digitally excluded. While benefits exist, a simple litmus test is a valid question. Does a child using AI-powered education technologies in a public school in the capital city of Zimbabwe, Harare, have the same access to education as a child in a remote rural town where access to data, broadband access and digital devices are not easily accessible, afforded or understood to be a necessity by the community existing to find their next meal. If the answer is no, then AI has a long way to go before it can catapult the country into an economic boom.

What is missing?

Undeniably, as highlighted by the *Preliminary Report of the Independent International Scientific Panel on AI*, this emerging technology is transformative, with evidence-backed gains across the identified sectors, yet conditional, as they depend on local context, adequate infrastructure, and human preparedness. The context element is part of the puzzle to solving the country's developmental impasse and it starts with an acknowledgement of the digital divide's extent, an assessment of who would be left behind and robust strategies to include them so that an informed agricultural sector would benefit, for instance, from predictive capabilities of AI improving the ability of farmers to increase their harvest, strengthening food security while the benefits for education are leveraged from private schools to the government schools in the most remote parts of the country.

This prompts reflection on the gaps that exist not just because of uneven AI use but also because of the technological environment in which it is being adopted. The fault line runs deep beyond the emerging technology itself that has seen benefits on one hand and adverse harm on the other.

This Southern African country has its fair share of challenges, not only in connectivity but also in digital literacy and digital access. Datareportal presents that in 2026, Zimbabwe had a population of 17.0 million. Approximately 60% of Zimbabwe's population is in the rural areas, according to the 2025 Report by the World Bank. From Datareportal, there were 6.54 million individuals using the internet in Zimbabwe at the end of 2025, when online penetration stood at 38.4%. To this end, aspects of connectivity, digital access, and literacy remain critical gaps that constrain the inclusive adoption of AI.

Areas of concern

Information ecosystem threats exist that can be cured by digital literary especially as the buzzing age of AI promises more sophisticated harm as seen through deepfakes. However, the government has adopted various legislative measures to address information disorders, with areas of misalignment with human rights especially where they criminalise false news or have overly broad sanctions. Media workers, for instance, have been arrested on the strength of false criminalisation of false news based on the country's Criminal Code and the Cyber and Data Protection Act, 2021, approaches that are contrary to international human rights standards. Yet, misinformation, disinformation and other harmful speech remain a threat to information integrity regardless and require a more proactive approach of digital literacy.

While the government has taken commendable strides to develop a National AI Strategy, this policy grandstanding raises eyebrows from a practical digital inclusion lens. With such governmental optimism about the technology's potential to improve various sectors in the country, the other side of the coin is the potential exclusion and harm arising from AI deployment, which is seemingly obscured by the AI buzz. According to the United Nations, without swift action and guardrails, AI risks accelerating the breakdown of the integrity of the information ecosystem.

This is aptly put and, critically, can be addressed by digital literacy on the responsible

use of AI in communities. Synthetic media has great potential for harm, with the need for capacity building on ethical content creation in the information ecosystem. The rise of AI-generated content is threatening the legitimacy of independent journalism, and this is an area where a forward-looking AI strategy can prioritise, to ensure human rights are preserved through measurable community sensitisation approaches.

The *African Union Continental AI Strategy* has identified critical structural risks including a gender digital divide and articulates clearly that "disparities in digital literacy and access to AI technologies could deepen existing inequalities between men and women, affect already unconnected people, limit opportunities for some populations, and hinder Africa's competitiveness in the global AI landscape." This assessment is a fair presentation of Zimbabwe's operating context, which would require a precise approach to ensure AI adoption yields inclusive results.

In order to address the digital divide, Paradigm Initiative's Londa 2025 Report on the state of digital rights and inclusion in Africa assesses the utilisation of universal service funds (USF) in Africa, with a specific recommendation for the Postal & Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe (POTRAZ) to proactively disclose information on its USF. The current opacity on the utilisation of the funds does not demonstrate accountability.

About rights or nothing at all

Paradigm Initiative's Global South Primer titled *What's the Whole Fuss About AI* elaborately states that "access, affordability skills and agency must work together." Without this marriage of approaches, broadband and data access alone still leave vast populations at the peripheries of the benefits that are yet to become a reality. In this primer, the concept of human dignity is positioned as central to Ubuntu and no doubt, a human rights imperative and not a Western notion. To this end, the human dignity of communities who are excluded from the conversations on AI is imperilled when policymaking processes exclude them from the tables of AI governance.

Reimagining life beyond the adoption of the national AI strategy, the proof is in the pudding. Beyond the hype that the policy exists for development, what key steps will be taken to ensure that development is attained in critical socio-economic sectors such as education, labour and health? These are some of the most pressing needs for the most vulnerable. How does AI benefit them? For Zimbabwe, digital inclusion more broadly and basically, before AI inclusion, is a primary necessity towards the equal realisation of basic human rights.

Promoting community solutions

The Zimbabwean AI Strategy posits an Ubuntu-based, multi-level governance system with robust legislation, ethical safeguards and leadership in responsible AI. In keeping with the spirit of *digital ubuntu*, the communitarian approach is not exclusionary but inclusionary, where communities thrive together, not as a single unit. In order to thrive in the AI era, community-centred connectivity approaches should be supported through responsive budgetary allocations with easy access to digital devices for the underserved communities and affordable internet access. The strategy clearly focuses heavily on addressing digital divides by largely increasing broadband and data access. While these are critical components, broadband access without digital devices is an abstract approach to addressing digital gaps in the country. Moreso, without deliberate and measurable digital literacy approaches, AI harms can thrive such as information disorders.

The *World Summit on Information Society (WSIS+20) Outcome Document*, adopted in December 2025, highlights that to achieve accessible and affordable broadband subscription costs, there is a need for collaboration among all stakeholders, utilizing universal service funds and community networks. Recognised approaches are key, such as ensuring that schools, post offices, libraries and hospitals are equipped to meet not just a connectivity needs but, holistically, access to digital devices and digital literacy as a neces-

sity for those in underserved communities. With inclusive, digital Ubuntu approaches, a national strategy can be truly meaningful for those often left behind as the technology adoption *blitzkrieg progre*sses like a runaway train. This is one sure way of addressing information integrity, when skills to use technology are well imparted.

Turning to the imperatives

The United Nations highlights that "underserved groups need equal access to digital opportunities and that digital divides reflect and amplify existing social, cultural and economic inequalities." This means that when adopting a technology, it should be accompanied by a robust human rights impact assessment that fully grasps the extent of the exclusion in order to better tackle it. While the benefits of AI can bring development to various sectors, the lived reality of digitally excluded groups and communities in Zimbabwe's society cannot be overlooked.

To move towards development and away from mere promises is to see digital inclusion as a human rights priority, reinforcing the right to human dignity, equality for all and guarding against disintegrating social cohesion in the information ecosystem. In order to have a holistic and well-rounded approach, digital divides are solved by multiple approaches with clear metrics. Financing is a critical aspect of that approach and requires national budgets to align and support implementation while various stakeholders ensure they collaborate with the government to dismantle the current abstract vision of development, making it a reality. To this end, the government must take clear pathways to operationalise the ambitious national AI strategy.

To transform a fallacy into reality, first, a robust human rights impact assessment is needed to address equality in digital access; second, commitment towards enabling access to digital devices; third, a measurable action plan to increase digital literacy with clear targets; fourth, leveraging diverse stakeholders including the private sector, media, civil society actors as partners in addressing the digital divide; fifth ensuring that human rights are protected as AI uptake increases; and lastly enhancing connectivity through broadband access enables a better digital future for AI adoption. ■

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The committees that decide what can be known

Joel Naoki Christoph

Most of the decisions an AI system embodies are made before you ever type a question. The deepest are written into technical standards that almost nobody outside the engineering world reads. If communication is a human right, its defenders need seats at the table where those standards are drafted.

By the time a chatbot answers a question, the decisive choices are already made. Some are in the training data and the company's policies. Others are buried deeper, in technical standards: the specifications that determine which languages a machine can process, what information accompanies an image, and whether your data can go from one service to another. These documents are rarely discussed in public, though their effects can last for decades.

In July 2026, I took part in a panel on "The Politics of Knowledge in the AI Age" at the WSIS Forum in Geneva, convened by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the UN human rights office, and Harvard Kennedy School's Carr-Ryan Center. The table gathered voices from government, a large video platform, and human rights work. Two of them matter for what I want to argue here. One was a technologist who helped write an open standard for content provenance. Another spoke for a platform that will have to obey it. The conversation kept returning to an uncomfortable point. The documents that decide much of what can be known in the AI age are ones almost nobody reads.

Knowledge has never been a neutral mirror of the world. Someone always decides what gets recorded, what gets trusted, and what gets found. Libraries decided which books to keep. School curricula decided which histories children would learn. Broadcast licences decided which voices reached the public. These were political choices, whoever made them and however they were described.

What has changed is the venue and the scale. Decisions about recording, trust, and retrieval now occur within digital systems at an enormous scale, and most of those systems are privately governed. When you ask a chatbot a question, something has already been determined about what it can retrieve, what it considers plausible, and what it will refuse to say. The politics of knowledge is the set of rules behind that determination.

Where the rules live

Many of those rules are written in documents called technical standards. A standard is an agreed-upon specification that enables independently built systems to work together. Standards do not determine every answer a system gives. They do something more basic. They define the formats, identifiers, and metadata through which information becomes legible, portable, and trusted. The ITU's Landscape of ICT Standards, which aggregates specifications from standards bodies worldwide, lists more than 8,000 of them, from fibre-optic transmission to connected vehicles.[1]

In practice, they read like legislation for machines. That overstates it only a little. Standards are voluntary and agreed upon by consensus among participating organisations. Once a specification is embedded in products, procurement rules and infrastructure, it can work as *de facto* law for the systems that follow it, because a product that ignores the standard simply does not connect. A choice made once can govern for decades, since replacing installed infrastructure is slow and costly.

Nobody in these rooms is secretly legislating. The consequences are political all the same, whether or not anyone intends them. Three features explain why. Standards are durable, so an

early choice lasts for years. They are written in rooms with uneven attendance. They operate beneath democratic scrutiny too, arriving as defaults that almost nobody changes.

The uneven attendance has a cause. Firms participate in standard-setting because interoperable standards open markets and reduce their costs, thereby strengthening the commercial incentive to participate. Affected communities, smaller economies, and most civil society groups have no comparable incentive and often no budget for travel and the slow hours of draft review. Some of those rooms are also gated. At the ITU, the study groups that draft standards are open to member states and to fee-paying members, so participation runs mainly through membership. There are narrower routes in: an organisation can join a Member State's national delegation, and the ITU can waive fees for civil society or Global South groups. These openings depend on a government's discretion or an administrative decision, which is a weaker footing than a standing right to attend. The result is a table that tilts toward those who profit from the outcome.

What can be known: the case of language

In his 2025 essay collection *Decolonizing Language and Other Revolutionary Ideas*, his final book, the Kenyan writer Ngũgũ wa Thiong'o described how colonisation denied native languages the status of valid sources of knowledge, an argument he set out most famously in *Decolonising the Mind* in 1986.2 Digital systems can repeat that denial politely, through omission.

A language can be formally encoded yet remain digitally marginal, because the keyboard layouts, datasets and evaluation tools that make it usable are missing. Character encoding and keyboard layouts are themselves standards work, handled largely by ISO and IEC. What is machine-readable can be used to train AI models. What is absent from that data fades from the answers those models produce. Thousands of languages are served poorly today, and whole bodies of knowledge are close to invisible to the systems that now mediate what people find. That is a political outcome masquerading as a technical gap.

The Global Digital Compact, adopted by UN member states in 2024, calls for artificial intelligence that supports diverse cultures and languages.3 Encoding tables and dataset specifications will decide whether that promise means anything.

Who controls knowledge: the case of provenance

Consider a newer example. The Coalition for Content Provenance and Authenticity (C2PA) develops an open standard that attaches verifiable information to images and video, recording when a file was made and how it was edited.4 For a journalist, provenance can help verify the source of a photograph of an atrocity and whether it has been edited. In an information environment flooded with synthetic media, that capability protects the credibility of human rights documentation.

The same standard, designed without care, does the opposite. The metadata that authenticates a video can also identify the person who filmed it. Verifiability that protects a newsroom becomes a surveillance trail that endangers a dissident. Human rights groups understood this early. The organisation WITNESS joined the standards process itself and co-chairs the coalition's work on threats and harms. That is why the technologist and the platform manager were at the same table in Geneva. The outcome depends on the details of the specification more than on the intentions of the people who wrote it.

When agency becomes a question of format

Between the language a system can process and the safeguards it offers, lies the question of human agency, and in standards, that question becomes concrete. Can people export what they have made, or is it captured within a single service? Can an automated decision be logged and questioned, or does it arrive without explanation

or appeal? Can someone leave a platform without losing their contacts, history, and audience? A right to challenge a decision that lives only in a company's terms of service can vanish with the next update. The same right, supported by a documented format and a portability requirement, remains in place after a change of management. Specifications can make these freedoms possible or make them impossible.

Communication rights arrived here first

Readers of this journal will recognise the pattern. The communication rights tradition has long argued that communication infrastructure is never neutral, as evidenced by the New World Information and Communication Order debates. The demand voiced at the WACC Partner Forum in Kathmandu, "nothing about us without us", applies directly to standardisation.

Communities are already acting on that insight. A recent issue of *Media Development* described the Kasepuhan Ciptagelar community in West Java, which built and governs its own internet infrastructure, and the indigenous mobile operators Wiki Katat and TIC OMV in Mexico, which sell telephone and internet service nationwide on their own terms. These initiatives show that communities can build and govern their own connectivity rather than only consume it. The next step is harder to see. A community network still has to use the global formats. Whoever writes those formats decides some things for every network that uses them.

What a rights-based approach means

Momentum already exists. In 2023, the UN human rights office published a report on human rights and technical standard-setting, with recommendations for building rights considerations into the work of standards bodies.5 The Internet Research Task Force has published guidance for reviewing Internet protocols for their effects on human rights.6 The Geneva panel itself brought together the ITU and the UN human rights office. The two now run a joint work plan on standards and human rights.

Three measures matter most.

1. A one-page human rights note attached to an early draft, written in plain language, so that a specification's likely effects are visible while the text can still change.

2. Funded participation for civil society. Because there is no commercial incentive for community groups to attend, someone has to pay for their seats. Funders who support media development can treat standards participation as fundable work, covering travel, fees and observer places.

3. Procurement rules that require privacy, portability and contestability safeguards in the standards that governments and large buyers adopt. Most firms follow the cheapest available option. The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights already assign companies a responsibility to respect rights.7 Procurement can make the rights-respecting option the cheapest one.

Proportionality keeps this credible. Many standards raise no evident human rights questions, and a short early screen can record that in a single line, so that fuller review concentrates where the stakes are highest: identity, content, and data flows. The screen should decide that, rather than an assumption about the subject matter. Even a transmission standard can affect access to information, and accessibility standards exist to serve disabled users. Inside companies, there is one more inexpensive step. Human rights teams and standards teams rarely speak with each other by default. Introducing them may be the most cost-effective measure available.

Where readers come in

None of this requires waiting for permission. Faith-based organisations, community media and civil society organisations built the communication rights agenda from the outside. The same approach applies now. The obstacle is that standards agendas are dense and hard to follow. What the field needs is a shared trans-

lation service that turns the technical agendas of the main standards bodies into readable alerts for non-technical groups, naming which draft touches identity, provenance or content moderation, and by when a comment would matter. A start exists. The Civil Society Alliances for Digital Empowerment project runs a hub of this kind, though it needs far more support to cover the field.8 Universities and training programmes can teach standards literacy the way they once taught media literacy.

There is also a role for the multilateral system. Standards bodies based in Geneva work a short walk from the UN human rights office. Regular exchange between the two communities, in both directions, would cost little and make a big difference.

We assume that great decisions about freedom are made in courts and parliaments, after the harm has occurred. In the AI age, many of them are made earlier, in a format, a field, a default. The editorial of a recent issue of this journal insisted that other technological worlds are possible. That is true. Some of those worlds are being written now, in committee rooms with empty chairs. The task is to fill them. ▪

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Data governance is being written without the people who feed the world

Soledad Vogliano

For food sovereignty movements, data justice means not only asking how data is governed, but in whose interests, under whose control, and with what consequences for peoples and the planet. It's about power relations and building frameworks that strengthen human rights, cultural diversity, self-determination and community-driven innovation.

In the halls of national and multilateral decision-making, policymakers are scrambling to make sense of data governance. The growing spectre of AI is extending into every corner of our economies and politics, its so-called "inevitability" becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy as our governments compete to lay the tracks ahead of its advance. AI has added urgency to the task of policymaking on data governance, and history has shown that when policy is rushed, it is very often at the expense of justice.

In arenas where data governance policy is in development, like the UN Commission on Science and Technology for Development Data Governance Working Group, and sectoral spaces like the World Health Organisation, discussions focus on abstract understandings of privacy, access, interoperability or benefit-sharing. Of course, all of these aspects matter – but in the context of rapid datafication of our planet's life-supporting systems, we must not get lost in these abstractions. We must remind ourselves that data governance must be framed in contextualized sectors and constituencies. For example, in rural development and food systems – where policy can impact up to 3.46 billion people worldwide – we must start at the beginning: with a shared understanding of how power and corporate interests are shaping this technological transformation.

Datafication of food systems

The datafication of food systems involves converting agricultural knowledge and resources into data assets, with the end goal of monitoring, tracking and optimizing those assets and production processes.[1] One example of this is the quantification of soil – collecting soil samples and measuring the micronutrients, carbon, and moisture within, enabling the soil quality to be tracked digitally. Of course, there is profit to be made from this data – in the case of soil, for example, the data can be processed to generate targeted fertilizer recommendations.[2]

With this phenomenon comes a new wave of enclosure of what used to be common goods. Soil, seeds and the knowledge historically held, shared and adapted collectively across generations, are all being converted into proprietary data assets though different modes of datafication (for example, the digital sequencing of genetic information and digital satellite imagery).

A 2022 study estimated that in the years between 2004 and 2020, the volume of data generated per hectare of agricultural land soared, from just a few megabytes to 18 gigabytes. The study predicted that number would reach 40.5 gigabytes by 2025.[3] In the short years since, the rapid growth of data sources on farms (sensors and digital devices, as well as satellites and drone technologies), and the exponential growth in demand for data with the advent of AI, has led to corporate controlled food systems being more data-driven than ever before.

Datafication provides further means for corporations to patent life – for example, seeds and genomes - and thus further entrench their control over global food systems. Data govern-

ance is where economics come into play – who decides what will be "datafied", who controls the data, how it is processed, and commercialized.

1. Who is behind the massive drive for datafication within agricultural ecosystems? Who is developing the architecture of digitalization, and who benefits?

A powerful new alliance has taken hold of food systems: Big Ag firms have joined forces with Big Tech corporations like Google, Microsoft, Alibaba and Amazon to create cloud platforms and AI-driven decision tools. These tools and platforms are being integrated into all parts of industrial agriculture, from seeds to chemical inputs to machinery. Together with Big Ag, Big Tech is now shaping which technologies will be developed, informing decision-making, effectively shaping the future of farming.[4]

This advance comes at a moment when corporate concentration of industrial agribusiness is at an all-time high. A new report by ETC Group and GRAIN – *Top Ten Agribusiness Giants* – outlines how five out of six food sectors can already be considered oligopolies, leaving food systems ever more vulnerable to shocks caused by climate impacts and global instability.[5]

Now, those agribusiness giants are teaming up with the most powerful companies on Earth to harvest data and lock farmers into costly digital platforms. The drive for datafication in our food systems is not in the interests of food sovereignty, innovation, nor to improve the lives and livelihoods of those producing our food. It is all about expanding into new territories for profit. Farms are the next frontier in the push to commodify the commons and feed the insatiable appetite of data-hungry AI models.

2. Who decides what data is collected and what counts as useful knowledge? Who controls the infrastructures where data is stored and processed?

Peasants, Indigenous Peoples, pastoralists, fisherfolk, agricultural workers, women and rural communities ensure the nutrition of billions of people every day. They preserve and protect the nutritional, cultural and spiritual value of our seeds, crops, wild and farmed animals, as they have done for millennia, within models that respect planetary boundaries. These groups together produce 70% of the world's food.[6]

These are the subjects of our food systems and at the heart of rural development policies – not simply "data providers" or "users" of digital tools. They are rights-holders, knowledge-holders and political actors. Their practices sustain food sovereignty and biodiversity and play a key role in building and preserving ecosystems resilience. The true extent of their contribution is beyond financial valuation.

They can all certainly benefit from access to technology and the use of data. However, in the digitalization architecture being constructed by Big Ag and Big Tech, they are not afforded the benefits of innovation. Instead, they are locked into dependency on subscription-based tools and platforms, while corporations encroach further into their territories.

For food sovereignty movements, data governance should support autonomy, not dependency. It should strengthen public and community-controlled infrastructures rather than deepen corporate concentration. It should promote frameworks for the commons and protect collective rights – including the rights of Indigenous Peoples and peasants.

This is not possible while the power imbalance between corporate giants and food producers goes unquestioned, and Big Ag and Big Tech are given free rein to shape the infrastructure of data collection, processing and use. Data justice requires us to return power and control of our food systems to those who generate it.

3. Who pays the price?

AI is rapidly reorganizing what production looks like all over the world. It is reshaping our economies and global value chains. In the midst of

this transformation, a new, yet familiar, order is emerging.

Governments, Big Tech and Big Ag corporations in the Global North are harvesting the value of data (assets, products, innovation patents) created by the low-paid labour and resources of those in the Global South. At the same time, those in the South are overwhelmingly forced to bear the environmental and social costs of critical mineral mining and AI infrastructure. Food sovereignty and data justice movements, particularly in Africa and other parts of the Global South are highlighting the "unbroken line" between colonialism and digital colonialism.[7] The deep asymmetries in digital infrastructure, capital, and bargaining power mean that countries are embarking upon digitalization and datafication from wildly different starting points. This global reality must be recognized amid the urgency to design national and international data governance policies.[8]

Conclusion

Data justice is not an add-on; it is a precondition for a genuinely people-centred development paradigm. It requires collective sovereignty over both data and mineral resources, paired with regenerative, non-extractive technological approaches – in this way, it is inseparable from environmental justice and human rights. Opposite to the abstract approaches of the data governance policy debates, an original data justice lens must be grounded in the lived experiences and livelihoods of food producers.

Rather than focusing on how to make data flow more efficiently, a data justice approach would interrogate whether certain data should be collected, shared or commercialized at all. This question seems to have been left in the dust far behind us, outpaced by the false urgency and inevitability narrative that propels the vehicle of AI adoption. It is our task to force a pause and pose this question to those who are accountable.

Global South peoples want to share equitably in the benefits of innovation, but not at the cost of allowing extractive data practices. Without an actionable data justice framework, new technologies like AI will follow the blueprint of colonial extractivism. By embedding the principle of data justice in multilateral spaces – in arenas that are drawing up rural development and food systems policies that will impact billions of people worldwide – we can protect the web of life while improving the lives and livelihoods of people across the planet. ■

This article is based on an intervention at the session "Putting data justice at the heart of AI governance" organized by IT For Change at the World Summit on the Information Society 2026.

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Costa Rica: la libertad de expresión y pluralismo mediático

Vilma Peña-Vargas

El reciente reportaje de Gretel Kahn para el Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, "Costa Rica used to be a beacon of press freedom in Central America. What changed?", documenta con precisión un declive reciente: en cinco años, Costa Rica cayó del quinto al puesto 38 en el índice de libertad de prensa de Reporteros Sin Fronteras, bajo el hostigamiento sistemático del gobierno de Rodrigo Chaves y, ahora, de su sucesora Laura Fernández.

Esto es un dato real, documentado con el testimonio de editores y periodistas costarricenses, y hay que nombrarlo sin ambigüedades, pero reducir el diagnóstico a "un gobierno de corte chavista que ataca a la prensa" – por más cierto que sea – deja fuera la pregunta que de verdad importa: ¿libre para decir qué, y en boca de quién?

El reportaje de Kahn sitúa el quiebre en 2022, con la llegada de Chaves al poder. Y en efecto, ahí se intensifica una ofensiva concreta: el desmantelamiento de la pauta publicitaria estatal, la persecución fiscal a directivos de medios, la revocación de visas, la construcción de redes de *trolls* financiadas o toleradas desde el poder. Todo eso está documentado y merece la condena más firme.

El deterioro de los medios costarricenses no empezó con Chaves. Tiene más historia de los que este episodio autoritario reconoce, y probablemente responde también a tendencias neoliberales que atraviesan la prensa en todo el planeta: concentración de la propiedad, crisis del modelo publicitario, precarización de las redacciones, entre otros rasgos y Costa Rica no es una excepción a esa tendencia global, pero tampoco se explica solo por ella.

Antes de Chaves, esos mismos medios – algunos hoy entrevistados con toda razón como víctimas de un poder autoritario – no eran garantes de pluralismo, sino guardianes de un orden. Un periodismo construido desde las salas de redacción de las élites económicas del país, con una agenda que rara vez incomodaba a quienes eran, simultáneamente, dueños de medios y socios del poder político y económico tradicional. Esa es la genealogía que el relato del "faro de libertad de prensa" omite: se defendía, casi siempre, el interés de un puñado de familias y grupos económicos, no el derecho colectivo a la comunicación.

Lo que amenaza el chavismo tico

La ausencia casi total de medios públicos y comunitarios en Costa Rica no es un dato menor: es estructural. Se puede tener libertad de prensa formal – y Costa Rica la tiene, con instituciones robustas y jurisprudencia constitucional que la protegen – y, al mismo tiempo, sostener un ecosistema informativo clasista y patriarcal, donde el pluralismo mediático nunca llegó a existir porque se limitó su existencia. Un discurso hegemónico no necesita censura para imponerse: le basta con ser el único con acceso a la pauta, a la agenda y al micrófono o cámara.

Lo que hoy amenaza el chavismo costarricense no es entonces ese pluralismo inexistente, sino el monopolio simbólico de una élite que hasta hace poco decidía en solitario qué era noticia y quién tenía derecho a contarla. Es un desplazamiento de poder dentro de las élites, no una apertura democrática del sistema mediático. Y por eso, defender a *La Nación* o a *CRHoy* frente al hostigamiento presidencial – algo necesario y urgente – no equivale a defender la pluralidad informativa del país. Son batallas relacionadas,

pero no son la misma batalla.

Noticias sin sujeto

Desde el Monitoreo Global de Medios (GMMP), promovido por WACC Global, llevamos veinte años documentando otra crisis, silenciosa y menos visible en los índices internacionales: la desaparición sistemática de las personas en la noticia, – no solo las mujeres ya de por sí bastante subrepresentadas. – Cada vez menos rostros, menos voces, menos sujetos que hablan en primera persona; cada vez más eventos narrados sin nadie adentro, donde la noticia misma se convierte en su propio protagonista. Es la pérdida progresiva del periodismo investigativo, crítico y educativo que forma ciudadanía, sustituido por una descripción de hechos sin las personas que los viven.

Una noticia sin sujeto es una noticia sin derechos: ni el derecho de que las personas protagonistas sean presentadas con dignidad, ni el derecho colectivo de toda la sociedad a comunicar y a ser escuchada.

Lo esperanzador: los medios resilientes

Hay un hecho esperanzador que merece tanto espacio como la denuncia, en Costa Rica, como en el resto de Latinoamérica, existen medios comunitarios que luchan por existir todos los días, con recursos mínimos y sin la protección de una gran redacción capitalina, por sostener el derecho a la comunicación de sus habitantes y territorios. Son experiencias que casi nunca aparecen en los índices internacionales ni en los grandes reportajes, pero que constituyen la base real del pluralismo mediático que el país no tiene y que espera desde una política estatal, para asegurar el resguardo de su libertad de existencia y expresión cotidiana.

Ese trabajo importa porque sin el derecho a la comunicación – el derecho de las comunidades a nombrarse, narrarse y ser escuchadas en sus propios términos – ningún otro derecho puede defenderse plenamente. No hay defensa posible de la salud, la tierra, el agua, el aire, la igualdad de género o la justicia si antes no existe la posibilidad de decirlas y de que esas voces circulen. Ahí, en esos medios persistentes, está la semilla de un periodismo verdaderamente democratizador: no el que resiste desde el privilegio, sino el que construye pluralismo desde la diversidad y el territorio.

Defender la prensa costarricense frente al autoritarismo de Chaves y Fernández es urgente, necesario y correcto. Pero la libertad de expresión que vale la pena defender con toda la energía no es únicamente la de un puñado de rotativos históricos enfrentados hoy al poder ejecutivo. Es la de una sociedad entera –con sus niñeces, juventudes, mujeres, sus comunidades rurales, sus periodistas comunitarios– con derecho a verse, oírse y nombrarse en sus propios medios. Esa es la libertad de expresión que todavía está por construirse en Costa Rica, y que ningún índice internacional mide del todo. ■

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Costa Rica: Freedom of expression and media pluralism

Vilma Peña-Vargas

Gretel Kahn's recent report for the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, "Costa Rica used to be a beacon of press freedom in Central America. What changed?", precisely documents a recent decline: in five years, Costa Rica fell from fifth to 38th place in

Reporters Without Borders' press freedom index, under the systematic harassment of Rodrigo Chaves's government and now his successor Laura Fernández.

This is a real, documented fact, backed by testimony from Costa Rican editors and journalists, and it must be named unambiguously. But reducing the diagnosis to "a Chaves-style government attacking the press"–however true– leaves out the question that really matters: free to say what, and in whose voice?

Kahn's report locates the rupture in 2022, with Chaves's rise to power. And indeed, that is when a concrete offensive intensifies: the dismantling of state advertising budgets, tax persecution of media executives, visa revocations, and the building of troll networks financed or tolerated by those in power. All of this is documented and deserves the firmest condemnation.

The decline of Costa Rican media did not begin with Chaves. It has a longer history than this authoritarian episode acknowledges, and likely also responds to neoliberal trends running through the press worldwide: concentration of ownership, the collapse of the advertising model, and the precarious situation of newsrooms, among other features. Costa Rica is no exception to that global trend, but it isn't explained by it alone.

Before Chaves, those same outlets – some rightly interviewed today as victims of authoritarian power – were not guarantors of pluralism but guardians of an order. A journalism built from the newsrooms of the country's economic elites, with an agenda that rarely inconvenienced those who were, simultaneously, media owners and partners of traditional political and economic power. That is the genealogy the "beacon of press freedom" narrative omits: what was defended, almost always, was the interest of a handful of families and economic groups, not the collective right to communication.

What Costa Rican Chavismo threatens

The near-total absence of public and community media in Costa Rica is not a minor detail: it is structural. One can have formal press freedom – and Costa Rica does, with robust institutions and constitutional jurisprudence protecting it – while simultaneously sustaining a classist and patriarchal information ecosystem, where media pluralism never came to exist because its existence was limited. A hegemonic discourse does not need censorship to prevail: it only needs to be the sole voice with access to advertising, the agenda, and the microphone or camera.

What Costa Rican Chavismo threatens today, then, is not that nonexistent pluralism, but the symbolic monopoly of an elite that, until recently, alone decided what counted as news and who had the right to tell it. This is a shift of power within the elites, not a democratic opening of the media system. And that is why defending La Nación or CRHoy against presidential harassment – necessary and urgent as that is – is not the same as defending the country's informational plurality. These are related battles, but they are not the same battle.

News without a subject

For twenty years, through the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP), promoted by WACC Global, we have documented another crisis–quieter and less visible in international indices: the systematic disappearance of people from the news, not only women, who are already significantly underrepresented. Fewer and fewer faces, fewer voices, fewer subjects speaking in the first person; more and more events narrated with no one inside them, where the news itself becomes its own protagonist. This is the progressive loss of investigative, critical, and educational journalism that builds citizenship, replaced by a description of facts stripped of the people who live them.

A news story without a subject is a news story without rights: neither the right of those at its centre to be presented with dignity, nor the collective right of all of society to communicate and to be heard.

The hopeful part: resilient media

There is a hopeful fact that deserves as much space as the denunciation. In Costa Rica, as elsewhere in Latin America, community media exist that fight to survive every day, with minimal resources and without the protection of a major capital-city newsroom, working to sustain their communities' and territories' right to communication. These are experiences that almost never appear in international indices or major reports, but that constitute the real foundation of the media pluralism the country lacks – and that awaits a state policy to guarantee the protection of its freedom to exist and to express itself.

That work matters because without the right to communication – the right of communities to name themselves, narrate themselves, and be heard on their own terms – no other right can be fully defended. There is no possible defense of health, land, water, air, gender equality, or justice if the possibility of speaking to them, and having those voices circulate, does not exist beforehand. There, in those persistent media outlets, lies the seed of a truly democratizing journalism: not one that resists from a position of privilege, but one that builds pluralism from diversity and territory.

Defending Costa Rican press against the authoritarianism of Chaves and Fernández is urgent, necessary, and right. But the freedom of expression worth defending with full force is not only that of a handful of historic newspapers now confronting the executive branch. It is that of an entire society – its children, its youth, its women, its rural communities, its community journalists – with the right to see themselves, hear themselves, and name themselves in their own media. That is the freedom of expression still to be built in Costa Rica, one that no international index fully measures. ▪

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Digital justice and cultural integrity for a people without a country

Badrul Hassan

In the world's largest refugee camp, ask a Rohingya family in Cox's Bazar how they manage mobile connectivity. For years, the answer could be managing two SIM cards, not one. A Bangladeshi SIM was often obtained informally because Rohingya refugees could not legally register one in their own names. A Myanmar SIM could still be kept alive where the signal reaches across the border.

The first might have been registered in the name of someone else. The second offered something the first could not, which is a way to call a cousin or relative in Myanmar, close enough to reach across the border into a country that still refuses to recognise the word "Rohingya". By late 2025, however, the situation in Bangladesh began to change. The government started a pilot to issue authorised SIM cards to registered Rohingya refugees, creating a legal route to mobile connectivity for the first time. The change has significance. But it also makes the question of who controls that connection more important, not less.

The Rohingya are among the most persecuted people on earth, stateless in law and in fact. For years, many relied on phone lines they could not legally register in their own names. That is where an honest account of digital justice has to start. Not with a policy document or a UN resolution, but with a phone whose connection depends on someone else's identity, a border signal,

or a rule that can change overnight. Everything that follows, the shutdowns, the biometric systems, the fight over whose language survives online, comes after that small, ordinary fact.

The switch

On 25 August 2019, a large, peaceful rally gathered in the camps to mark two years since the exodus. Estimates ranged into the low hundreds of thousands. It was orderly, well organised, and openly political, with speakers demanding recognition, justice, and safe return with citizenship. The scale unsettled Dhaka. A stateless population meant to be waiting quietly for repatriation had organised across camps and drawn international attention on its own terms.

The authorities increasingly treated the communication infrastructure itself as a security problem. The rally had been organised substantially through mobile phones and social media. On 1 September, the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission ordered telecommunications operators to shut down mobile phone services in the camps within seven days. The following day, it ordered operators to shut down 3G and 4G services in the camps each day between 5 pm and 6 am. By early September, the restrictions had hardened into a round-the-clock blackout, alongside instructions to stop selling SIM cards to Rohingya customers.[1]

The foreign secretary cited law and order, security, rumour and misinformation, and the risk of criminal activity, adding that the internet was not a suitable medium for authentic community messaging. A population that had just survived a campaign of violence, already stripped of a country and then a name, was now being told that its use of a telephone was itself a risk requiring management.

The blackout held for nearly a year. It took a pandemic to move it. By August 2020, with COVID spreading and UN agencies warning that refugees without connectivity faced serious barriers to health information and services, high-speed service returned after the authorities lifted the restriction.

In July 2024, mass student-led protests over public sector job quotas escalated into a nationwide uprising that eventually forced Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina from office in early August. The government's response during the July phase included a countrywide internet blackout lasting several days, followed by continuing restrictions on parts of online access.

The camps in Cox's Bazar were caught in that same national shutdown. Refugees described the interruption in practical terms as they were unable to reach relatives across the border, unable to work, and in some cases unable to move money or buy food through the digital systems on which the camp economy had come to depend. Service returned as the national restrictions eased.[2]

A name that isn't used

Before there was a network to switch off, the name Rohingya was already being denied. For decades Myanmar's government has refused to use the word Rohingya in official discourse, insisting instead on "Bengali", a term that casts the population as recent arrivals from elsewhere. The 1982 Citizenship Law then entrenched their exclusion from citizenship. The refusal to recognise the name and the refusal to recognise the citizenship claim are closely connected. The later restrictions on communication did not create that exclusion; they operated within a system in which the population's identity was already contested.

Bangladesh's terminology reflects both its legal position and the diplomatic circumstances of the Rohingya crisis. The Government officially designated them as "Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals" (FDMN), rather than refugees. The choice emerged during negotiations over identity documentation, when Bangladesh resisted including the word "refugee" on registration cards and proposed the FDMN designation instead. Bangladesh is not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol, but the FDMN terminology was also tied to its handling of the crisis as a displacement from Myanmar

and to the planned return of the population.

The terminology also had a diplomatic dimension. Bangladesh was negotiating with Myanmar over repatriation while Myanmar rejected both the name Rohingya and the description of the population as forcibly displaced. At the same time, Bangladesh did use "Rohingya" in some diplomatic and political statements, particularly when referring to their identity and their return to Myanmar.

Digital ownership is difficult on both sides of the border. In Myanmar, telecom registration has been tied to identity documentation, while the citizenship framework leaves most Rohingya without the documents associated with recognised citizenship. The National Verification Card has been controversial among Rohingya because it does not recognise them as Rohingya citizens. Many families nonetheless kept a Myanmar SIM alive through informal channels, since it was the only line that reached across the border.

The language itself carries a quieter version of the same erasure. Rohingya has a long history of oral use, alongside attempts to represent it in different scripts. Decades of displacement pushed instruction and administration towards Burmese, Chittagonian or Bangla, depending on the setting. Many Rohingya were fluent in Burmese, but their speech was rarely quite that of the majority. Their speech carried the influence of Rohingya and Rakhine, with differences in pronunciation and vocabulary that reflected where they came from and the communities in which they had lived. As a result, children often encountered formal literacy through a language different from the one spoken at home.

A small opening

The picture has been slowly changing. An app called Rohingya Zoban now teaches reading and writing in Hanifi, a modern script developed for Rohingya. The app was officially launched in Kutupalong in June 2026 with support from the Bangladesh authorities. It is a small project, run on ordinary phones, and it will not undo decades of disrupted schooling. But it offers something different. A community is building a written record in its own language rather than having one imposed or withheld.[3]

Put the naming dispute and the app side by side and cultural integrity gets easier to define. Reaching people with information is only part of it. What matters as much is whether the words carrying that information, and the name attached to the people receiving it, belong to them.

Infrastructure without inclusion

Whatever the state does with the switch, an entirely different apparatus runs underneath it, and this one rarely gets shut off. Every registered refugee in Cox's Bazar carries a biometric Smart Card. It sits at the centre of an interlocking set of systems, including UNHCR's registration ecosystem, the World Health Organization's health information platform and the World Food Programme's beneficiary and transfer system known as SCOPE. Food assistance uses these linked systems, with Building Blocks used in the humanitarian response as a blockchain-based platform for transactions. The technical achievement is considerable, particularly in a setting where nearly everything else about people's legal identity is uncertain.

UNICEF and other development partners have also introduced a digital multi-channel Complaint and Feedback Redress Mechanism (CFRM) to support Accountability to Affected People (AAP), incident reporting and prevention of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (SEAH). The mechanism brings together feedback and complaints from different programmes and organisations in the response.

A displaced population with no state of its own is nonetheless fully legible to a coordinated set of institutions, verified and cross-referenced without the paperwork gaps that plague less organised crises.

But a study from India's Aapti Institute, based on fieldwork inside the camps, found something less comfortable beneath that compe-

tence. The coordination system is built around the government and the largest international agencies, while local and national organisations can remain at the edges of decisions even when they may understand the community's needs more precisely than outside actors. The infrastructure can work well without the people affected by it having an equal role in deciding how it works.[4]

Being connected to a system is not the same as having a hand in what that system does with you. A biometric card can reliably deliver a food ration and, at the same time, become part of a record whose use the person carrying it has little power to influence.

When protection becomes exposure

In 2021, the Bangladesh Government submitted the personal data of at least 830,000 Rohingya refugees to Myanmar for repatriation eligibility assessments. The data had been collected through the joint Bangladesh-UNHCR registration process and included biometric and other identifying information. UNHCR maintains that refugees were informed of the registration's purposes and separately asked to consent to sharing their data with Myanmar. Human Rights Watch disputed whether this amounted to genuine informed consent. It found that UNHCR had not carried out a full data protection impact assessment and that refugees interviewed said the risks were not explained clearly. The episode leaves a difficult question at the centre of a system designed to protect people. How meaningful is consent when the same registration controls access to services?[5]

Here the two questions meet. The shutdown story is about access, whether a switch is on or off. The naming story is about recognition, whose word for themselves gets to count. The data transfer brings the two together. A people denied a secure legal identity also lost control over information that could be used to identify them, with the institutions built to protect them becoming part of the chain through which that information moved.

What survives anyway

The story does not end there. Across the camps, much of the work of reaching people with urgent information still happens through channels that are simpler than an app. Information hubs, radio and in-person outreach remain important because technology does not solve the problems of literacy, language and trust on its own. A signal alone does not make communication accessible.

Digital media in the camps also does something the humanitarian system cannot do for the Rohingya themselves. Phones are used to stay in touch with relatives and the diaspora, exchange news and warnings, document life in the camps and speak to audiences outside them. WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and other platforms have become informal spaces for sharing information and maintaining community ties. Rohingya photographers and media creators are also telling their own stories rather than appearing only as subjects in someone else's.

But access is not equal. Women and girls often have less control over phones and internet access, while language, literacy, cost and surveillance shape who can participate. What matters is who can use it, in which language, and how much control they have over what they share.

Rohingya Zoban belongs in this same category of modest, real alternatives. It is built around the community's own script and taught in the community's own language, which is more than most systems serving the camps can claim. The information hubs and the language app are not evidence that the wider system is becoming inclusive. They are examples of what inclusion looks like when people can recognise themselves in the way information is produced and received.

Coming back to the phone

Come back, finally, to the two SIM cards. "Nothing about us without us", the disability rights movement's insistence on treating people as agents in their own lives rather than as subjects of decisions made by others, is relevant here. For a stateless population, the question goes one step

further. The harder question is who decides the terms on which they are permitted to speak, and what happens to their data once they do.[6]

With two SIMs, one can connect a Rohingya family to Bangladesh; another can connect relatives across the border. For years, neither connection was something the family could securely claim in its own name. One was unofficial; the other depended on a signal crossing a border that the people carrying the phone could not cross freely.

That is the contradiction at the heart of digital justice in the Rohingya camps. Connectivity can give people a way to speak, work, organise and remain connected to family. But access can still depend on an identity they do not possess, a system they do not control, or data they never fully agreed to surrender. ■

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What is lost when knowledge moves through machines rather than bodies?

Nathaly Espitia and Denisse Albornoz

This article contains two voices: mine, Nathaly Espitia, speaking from the Cañaveralejo River basin in Cali, Colombia, and Denisse Albornoz, speaking from the shores of the Pacific Ocean in Lima, Peru. Together, we reflect on the transmission and preservation of knowledge and memory through communication and new technologies. I'll speak first.

In 2017, I was waiting for a plane while listening on a phone, together with the other members of Nois Radio, to the news that, by a very small margin, the "No" vote had won the peace referendum. Colombia had decided to vote against reaching an agreement. In the seats of that small airport, the sadness was palpable. How could a country immersed in an armed conflict that had lasted more than six decades decide not to pursue an elusive peace that had not been achieved through armed force?

That same year, through other mechanisms, the Santos government managed to begin the process. The agreement included an exercise to create an archive and preserve the memory of the conflict – one that, among other things, sought to repair the victims in multiple ways and outside the framework of traditional justice, including by preserving and recounting the memory of the conflict. In this sense, communication through

multiple voices and in digital spaces has been vital in seeking to uphold an agreement that has been imperfect, poorly executed and has done little to fulfil its promises to victims.

On June 21, 2026, I was once again sitting, listening to the news that Abelardo de la Espriella had become the new president of Colombia. The proposed approach of his government was to resume a constant and direct armed struggle through the use of weapons. In August 2026, Abelardo de la Espirella appointed a conflict denier as director of the National Center for Historical Memory, the now director of the centre proposed, in 2022, defunding mechanisms such as the Truth Commission, which had been responsible for safeguarding and preserving the conflict archive, including in digital form.

How have communities responded to the power structures that decide what is told and what is preserved in the era of digital spaces, social media, and artificial intelligence? And from which voices, and in what languages, is historical memory – the kind that helps prevent repetition of the conflicts – being told?

Sites of contestation

This question has become more urgent as governments across the region have reduced or reorganized the public institutions responsible for memory, culture, and Indigenous affairs. A few months ago, my colleague Denisse, who lives in Peru and is also writing this article with me, described a visit to the Lugar de la Memoria y la Reconciliación, one of Lima's memory museums, now facing threats of defunding and closure.

Like in Colombia, in Peru, the struggle over memory is a question of whose bodies can exist safely in public spaces, which territories are protected or made to bear the costs of extractivism, and the languages in which stories and worldviews are imagined and told. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, established to investigate the political violence that devastated Peru between 1980 and 2000, titled the summary of its final report Hatun Willakuy, Quechua for *el gran relato*, or "the great story", as a means to amplify the thousands of indigenous voices that were killed in that period. The Lugar de la Memoria y la Reconciliación was created in part to ensure political violence and terrorism would not also extinguish their place in the nation's history. Yet the institution itself has become a site of contestation, questioning how the voices lost in this conflict are narrated and remembered.

Outside the halls of a museum, memory lives in how we gather, care, cultivate, create, and share what we know. As the government of Keiko Fujimori took office in Peru, continuing the political legacy marked by the crimes against humanity for which Alberto Fujimori was convicted – including the forced sterilization of thousands of mostly rural and Indigenous women – I keep thinking of the women who continue to provide nourishment and collective care when the state fails them. In the women who organize *comedores populares* and *ollas comunes*; the Kukama women who went to court to defend the Marañón River and its right to flow freely; the seed guardians of the southern Andes who are recovering and sharing native seeds in response to a changing climate; and the Shipibo-Konibo women of Cantagallo, who encode ancestral knowledge into kené, weaving it across textiles and murals and bringing into public view histories and ways of knowing that official institutions have often left out or made difficult to see.

These are all forms of *acuerpamiento:* bodies gathering and sustaining one another, keeping alive forms of knowledge that have endured beyond the institutions meant to preserve them. As more of these memories are carried into digital spaces – what happens to collective memory as the knowledge we carry is increasingly shaped by new technologies?

AI and our infrastructures of memory

Since the widespread introduction and pervasiveness of AI in the collective imagination, self-organized activists and communities are experimenting with new ways to hold community spaces that preserve memories that have sustained their wellbeing and lives, while assessing

what it would mean for AI to become part of this infrastructure. There is an undeniable tension between the possibilities afforded by these technologies and the disconnection, addiction, dependency, and other digital mechanisms that can increasingly separate people from human contact.

When and why use AI? Is it the future? The past is constructed in the present, or, as some Indigenous communities say – and right now I am thinking of the Misak in Colombia – the future lies behind us, and the past is what we are walking toward. Time, then, is not linear. What lies ahead is knowledge: cultural heritage and generational wisdom. What paves the way is what has already happened: the decisions we make and whether what we create is in harmony with nature and the ecosystem. In Indigenous and rural communities, knowledge is carried forward without haste, and decisions that affect the whole community are made collectively.

In the race toward AI, this principle has not necessarily been followed. The idea that we need to inhabit that space – including by developing datasets from Indigenous communities that go beyond language – may serve technology more than the communities themselves. New technologies have helped address specific challenges, such as access to information in Indigenous languages. At the same time, communicators and activists have questioned the urgency behind their implementation.

A few days ago, I heard a colleague ask, "Why do we have to respond to that call?" Why the urgency regarding our data? Why, if it is not a necessity for us, is it presented as one? Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and Black communities are debating the advantages of entering that space, who keeps their data, for what purposes, for how long and under what frameworks. After protecting their knowledge for decades, they are now being urged to hand it over through a narrative that suggests they cannot progress, innovate, access rights, or be included without embracing this technology.

Across Latin America, AI initiatives are bringing Indigenous languages, many of them transmitted largely through speech, into digital spaces where they have long been poorly represented. In Peru, some efforts focus on language revitalisation. Voces, tecnología en tu lengua is developing translation AI tools from an intercultural perspective with Iskonawa and Shipibo-Konibo communities, while Siminchikkuna-rayku uses crowdsourcing to build digital text and voice corpora for endangered languages, including Quechua. Other projects, such as Illariy and Quispe Chequea, are using AI to bring news and fact-checking in Quechua, Aymara, and Awajún to wider audiences, including through community radio.

But what happens when an oral tradition has to be adapted to a technological system? The creators of Illariy, for example, found that some Quechua consonants could not be reproduced and struggled to approximate the language's spoken rhythm. Technical choices will shape how language is represented in digital systems, sometimes in ways that may not fully reflect how it is embodied and passed between generations. What futures are being imagined through these technologies for the many worlds carried through oral tradition?

While these uses of AI emerge from real needs and aspirations, their effects on culture and intergenerational knowledge sharing may only become visible over time. AI is being introduced into activities that have traditionally been sustained through relationships. What happens to the social fabric when some of its core functions, such as building trust, reciprocity, and care, become mediated by algorithms and technology companies shaping what is preserved and heard, and who becomes visible in digital spaces?

Possible futures built on community, pauses and dignified hope

This is the time to think about how these technologies can remain community-owned and responsive to the relationships and forms of knowledge they are meant to support, rather than asking those relationships to adjust to the proto-

cols and logics of digital technologies.

This question has stayed with me since the earthquake in Colombia on 10 August 2026: where is the memory of an event that exposed us to so much pain and violence stored, and how is it communicated? From 7:34 a.m. onward, digital and analogue technologies shaped the experience of the affected cities. In Cali connectivity was intermittent during the first hour. After 8:10 a.m., Comuna 19, the hardest-hit area, lost almost all connection. Big Tech failed us when communication was most urgent, and for many hours, radio was our only way of learning what was happening elsewhere. At the same time, mobile devices preserved memories of those days spent recovering lives and bodies from the rubble. Technology – both analogue and digital – helped establish timelines, document what we wanted to remember, and support rescue efforts. As part of Nois Radio, I was also one of the co-coordinators of a sound brigade, where we used sound technologies and our knowledge to help rescuers work more accurately.

At the various collapsed buildings, volunteers created archives from materials recovered from the rubble. Local digital media outlets took it upon themselves to tell stories beyond those covered by local, departmental, and national authorities, whose narratives often seemed designed to portray government officials as heroes without addressing the complexity of the situation or giving voice to diverse and dissenting perspectives. This experience is a perfect example of why communicators and channels that amplify local information matter.

New technologies can be allies, but not when they homogenize complex local problems and ways of knowing or impose quick, universal solutions. Perhaps the future lies in returning to local technologies and intimate conversations: tools and exchanges that respond to specific needs, remain adaptable, and can still inform broader discussions among communities that see themselves reflected in them.

Historical memory is constructed – and must be constructed – outside institutions, otherwise we risk having only one side of the story presented and preserved. This is where the community's autonomous, self-managed infrastructure has become vitally important: ensuring that the historical memory of our losses, our grief, our stories and the different ways the earthquake impacted us are told and shared. Above all, it ensures that they are not forgotten – not only because of the speed at which algorithms operate, but also because of the speed with which those in power shift the focus and other tragedies become headlines.

Amid this sense of urgency, communities are pausing for dialogue, debate, and analysis, making decisions at their own pace and going back to where knowledge lives. The same pause is necessary when we think about AI. Beyond using it, what are the conditions for appropriating it? How should communities decide whether, how, and for what purpose it is needed, and to whom their data should be provided? What infrastructures are built and which are eroded in the process?

At this moment, AI infrastructure is not ours. Even open-source developments depend on infrastructure created within the Global North, by powers far removed from our Latin American territories. This infrastructure requires massive capital and reflects a relationship with nature that does not place harmony and life at the centre – unlike the worldview of rural, Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and Black communities. This is a call to decentralize digital technologies and take a breath before acting. Where is our knowledge headed? What relationships are lost when knowledge is transferred to machines rather than between generations? How can we imagine a future that grows from our relationships, the land, and the ways we have learned to care for one another? ▪

Disclosure: The text in this article was written by both authors. AI tools were used to correct grammar and improve readability, after which it underwent another round of human editing to ensure our voices and the heart of our ideas were still present.

The danger of a single answer

Ila Schoop Rutten

Many of us spend a fair amount of time worrying about what artificial intelligence makes up. Some may remember, for example, when a pair of lawyers used Chat GPT to write their legal brief and the chatbot cited fictitious legal precedent. Alongside hallucinated court cases, chatbots have been known to invent academic papers, attribute quotations to people who never said them, and occasionally produce the kind of answer that makes you wonder whether "intelligence" was an unfortunate choice of branding.

There is now an entire cottage industry devoted to teaching people not to trust an A.I. when it sounds most certain, or most cloying. But through my work studying information ecosystems, a different, almost opposite question has started to gnaw at me: What about the things A.I. does not invent, but make disappear?

When we give a chatbot a complicated question, it usually returns something that looks reassuringly finished. The answer might contain caveats, but its generation does not recreate the experience of actually researching a contested subject, for example, eighteen open browser tabs, two academics who appear to despise one another, a newspaper article that contradicts the official account, an obscure PDF from 2007, and the growing suspicion that we started out with the wrong question in the first place. The chatbot takes this mess and turns it into fairly boring but convincingly sleek and complete text.

This finished quality is, of course, why we use it. Why I use it.

But the surface elegance of the answer conceals an odd fact. Somewhere between our prompting and those almost instantly-generated paragraphs, the hodgepodge of disagreement has been synthesized. Some sources have mattered more than others and some were neglected altogether. A history that has never been digitized, a language with little presence online, a different people's way of being and knowing, or an experience that makes sense only to somebody who knows a landscape, sound, smell or feel of a particular object in their hand has a much harder time finding its way onto our screens.

The answer provided by a chatbot may be perfectly correct, which is part of the problem. It is by the same token, insufficient. Our chatbots often sound like an undergraduate who read enough of their curriculum to sound supremely confident but not yet enough to have doubts.

Scholars of decoloniality have long been interested in a peculiar kind of erasure: not necessarily the deliberate destruction of knowledge, but the process by which some ways of knowing come to look like *knowledge itself*, while others are marked as local, traditional, subjective, or strange. Aníbal Quijano described this as part of the coloniality of knowledge: European ways of understanding the world acquired an authority that survived formal colonialism, becoming the standard against which other knowledge systems were judged. The Colombian philosopher Santiago Castro-Gómez takes the idea a step further. He calls this privileged position the "zero point": the fantasy that one can somehow stand outside history and culture, looking neutrally down on everyone else's ways of knowing.

The hierarchy that follows is familiar. On one side sit science, statistics, law, academic research and official records. These are forms of knowledge whose conventions have become so established that we often forget they have conventions at all. On the other side rests oral histories, customary practices, spiritual interpretations, Indigenous knowledge, and understandings acquired through land, craft, memory or experience. These are usually identified as belonging to

a particular culture. The first group, by contrast, can appear to belong to no one. It simply describes the world.

This distinction is more consequential than deciding that somebody is wrong. If I tell you that you are wrong, I have at least admitted that we are making competing claims about the same world. We can argue about the evidence, about facts: things that happened and that others can witness, document, or contest. But saying that what you know does not really count as knowledge is a rhetorical kneecapping: it removes your claim from the argument before the argument has begun.

The power of the "zero point", then, is not simply that one worldview defeats another. It is that one worldview ceases to look like a worldview at all. It becomes the neutral position from which everyone else is described.

This is also what makes the idea feel newly relevant to artificial intelligence. A chatbot rarely announces the historical, cultural or institutional assumptions embedded in the material from which it has learned. It does not normally speak as one participant in an argument. It speaks from nowhere. And because it speaks from nowhere, its answer can easily sound as though it comes from everywhere.

There are historical cases in which this process was not subtle. Indigenous peoples in Australia and North America developed sophisticated systems of cultural burning: deliberately setting small, carefully timed fires based on deep knowledge of particular landscapes and weather systems in order to reduce the risk of wildfire. Colonial governments suppressed these practices, and the removal of people from their lands and of children from their communities interrupted the transmission of the knowledge that sustained them. Faced with the growing problem of massive, out-of-control wildfires today, authorities in several places are again working with Indigenous practitioners as they reconsider the consequences of a fire-management philosophy built around suppression.

What's notable here is that the knowledge was not tested, then disproved. The practice through which the knowledge existed was prevented from happening. You can try to write down that a certain plant should burn at a particular time of year. That does not necessarily mean you know how to burn it. The knowledge may remain partially undocumented because it resides in numerous subtle cues, perhaps partly in the smell of the vegetation, how a particular wind behaves, what happened in that place the year before, all in addition to what somebody older tells you while standing beside you. Remove people from the land, ban the practice and wait a generation, and a strange thing happens: information might technically survive while the ability to know in the same way begins to disappear.

Marginalization of knowledge systems

The term "epistemicide" is sometimes used to describe the destruction and marginalization of knowledge systems associated particularly with colonial domination. Some may protest that epistemicide is an unnecessarily violent word that cheapens its linguistic relatives. It also calls to mind an aggressive destruction of manuscripts, the banning of languages, the killing or displacement of people who carry knowledge and the suppression of the institutions through which they pass it on. But epistemicide is not just the deliberate burning of the library of Alexandria or the destruction of the Aztec codex. It can, like other forms of colonial erasure, be more insidious, and slow; the unintended consequence of other forms of dominance and oppression.

Calling anything happening on ChatGPT or another chatbot epistemicide is probably, at this point, unfounded. But the legacy of decolonial scholars raises a point that feels harder to dismiss: knowledge does not have to be destroyed in order to disappear.

For centuries, societies have built machines, some literal, some institutional, for sorting knowledge. The library classified it, the university credentialled it, the encyclopaedia condensed it. Newspapers would decide what deserved the

front page and then search engines like Google or Bing would arrange it into a ranked list whose order could determine whether a business prospered or a news article was read. None of these systems has ever presented humanity with an unmediated view of what humanity knows. In other words: A.I. did not invent knowledge hierarchies.

What has changed is that generative A.I. can make the hierarchy harder to see. A Google search, for all its unfairness, generally leaves evidence of the disagreement lying around. Search for a controversial historical event and you might get the government account, a university page, a newspaper investigation, an advocacy organization and a discussion forum filled with people calling one another all kinds of choice words. You still have to navigate by mouse or thumb, and while the system ranks the choices, it at least leaves some of the choosing to you. A chatbot, on the other hand, is more obliging. It reads the room and tells you what happened.

Inherent limitation of chatbots

This is where that smooth, quick, single answer becomes slightly misleading. A chatbot can provide many answers. Ask it to give five interpretations of a historical controversy and it will happily oblige. But before the model can supply us with five perspectives, something has already determined what qualifies as a perspective worth naming.

Some forms of knowledge were available in abundance. Others were barely present in the material from which the system learned. Some were written in highly digitized languages; others were not. Some arrived in peer-reviewed journals, government documents, newspapers and encyclopaedias… the sorts of explicit, codified knowledge that machines can process especially easily. Others live in memory, apprenticeship, ceremony, local language or repeated practice. This all may simply be a consequence of asking a machine to know things– an inherent conundrum rather than purposeful flaw in the tech.

What does something have to become before a machine can know it? A ceremony can be captured in a video. The forest can become environmental data. A sacred object can become an entry in a museum database. Much may be gained in the translation of knowledge into something accessible and that transcends time and space, but what will be lost in translation?

There is a temptation in conversations about A.I. diversity to treat the problem as one of inventory: What did the training material of the A.I. include? Does the dataset contain enough languages? Enough material from Africa? Enough Indigenous knowledge? Enough women? These are important questions. But imagine, for a moment, the perfectly inclusive dataset. Every culture is represented. Every language has been digitized. Improbably, the world's oral histories have been carefully recorded, with consent. We would still have to decide what the machine should do with all of it. It would still have to translate, of course, and it would still have to decide when two accounts contradict one another, when they are simply answering different questions, and what can safely be compressed into three paragraphs for somebody who has asked a question while standing in line for coffee.

The plurality of inputs does not necessarily create plurality of knowledge. You can put the entire world inside a machine and still teach the machine to speak with one voice. After all, generative A.I. models are not thinking machines but statistical ones. They do not "know" what they say but calculate the likelihood of the next word.

Of all the very legitimate worries about artificial intelligence mass unemployment, autonomous weapons, surveillance, weaponised deepfake pornography, data centres gobbling up the planet's resources; the eventual arrival of a superintelligence that decides humans are bumps on the road to finishing a task and we ought to be flattened, the one I find myself returning to is much less cinematic: What if the technology that gives us unprecedented access to all of human knowledge also gradually makes that knowledge more alike? In other words, what happens

when the place where we go to encounter different ways of understanding the world is designed to give us an answer?

We can imagine an alternative to this epistemic monoculture, a kind of ecology of knowledges. The phrase can sound like the sort of thing that's adoringly parroted inside a graduate seminar, but the idea behind it is fairly intuitive. Different ways of knowing should be able to encounter one another without one automatically serving as the yardstick by which all the others are measured.

To be sure, this does not mean that every idea deserves equal respect. If somebody tells me that a ritual cures leukaemia, I do not think cognitive justice requires an oncologist to shrug and call chemotherapy another culturally situated narrative. Scientific methods allow us to test claims in ways that have produced extraordinary knowledge. Traditions can be oppressive. Communities disagree internally and people can be wrong. The interesting part starts after we acknowledge all of this because it is also possible to be correct about a fact and still misunderstand the world in which that fact has meaning.

A.I. does not necessarily have to make this problem worse. The technology could be an extraordinarily powerful device for epistemic pluralism. Imagine asking about the management of a forest and receiving not just the dominant forestry literature but the knowledge of people who have lived in and protected that forest for generations, clearly attributed and presented on its own terms. We could also envision a translation system that helps a minority language survive in a digital economy instead of making the dominant language even more indispensable. There could be a chatbot that interrupts its own answer to tell you that the question you asked makes sense in one intellectual tradition but not in another.

In some respects, A.I. could do this better than Google ever did. A search engine requires you to know enough to formulate the search term. A Chatbot can interpret a garbled half-question before explaining the assumptions behind competing arguments. It can make obscure knowledge accessible to somebody who did not know the vocabulary required to find it. The technology is not inherently a machine for epistemic monoculture. That may make the choices now being made about its design more important; there is a difference between building a system that contains information about a culture and allowing the people who sustain that culture to exercise some control over how its knowledge is categorized, shared and interpreted. This is where the somewhat bureaucratic language of cultural rights becomes useful. International human-rights law protects, among other things, participation in cultural life, cultural expression, language and access to and enjoyment of cultural heritage.

A community whose songs, stories and practices have all been fed into an A.I. model might be extraordinarily well represented in one sense and almost powerless in another. Who decided which material could be included? Who labelled it? Who decided what was sacred, private, communal or available to anyone with a prompt? Who benefits economically from the model's ability to reproduce it? Who gets to tell the machine it has misunderstood?

Inclusion on whose terms?

The usual response to technological bias is inclusion. Getting more people into the dataset, expanding the languages, and hiring more diverse annotators are sensible things to do. But inclusion can reproduce the original problem if entering the system requires everybody to conform to categories designed elsewhere. There is an old colonial trick hidden in this possibility: you are welcome to participate, provided that I get to decide what participation means.

Colonial epistemicides involved coercion, dispossession, violence, schools, churches, armies and states. Let's not exaggerate, perhaps a chatbot confidently summarizing a tradition it does not understand is not the digital equivalent of any of these things, at least not while there are still other sources of knowledge and exchange available. The more useful question is probably

whether A.I. could help create the conditions under which some forms of knowledge gradually become harder to sustain.

The A.I. researcher Andrew Peterson has used the term "knowledge collapse" to describe a possible narrowing of accessible knowledge as models and the people who use them preferentially reproduce popular information at the expense of obscure alternatives. One analogy is the "streetlight effect", from the joke about a drunk person searching for his keys under a streetlamp. He did not lose them in that spot but the light there is better.

A.I. is an extraordinarily bright streetlight– if the easiest information to retrieve, summarize, translate and incorporate into institutional life is the information machines can already see, we will gradually begin looking there more often. People who speak languages poorly served by digital tools will likely increasingly use languages that work better. Essayists and policy wonks who begin research with an A.I. answer may never know which intellectual paths were absent from it.

The danger here would not be that a machine declares a particular knowledge system wicked and handily flammable. It would be that the machine becomes useful enough that we begin reorganizing ourselves around what it can recognize.

So this is the part of the problem that reverses my original concern. I started by wondering what disappears when a chatbot produces an answer. Is the more interesting question actually what happens when humans begin changing the way they produce knowledge because they know that machines are responsible for finding and processing it?

Oral traditions might be textualized and institutions might reorganize archives so machines can ingest them. Of course, these things are not inherently bad. Preserving endangered material in digital form can be enormously valuable.

For centuries, governing authorities asked communities to make themselves legible to the state, the church, the scientist, the census-taker or the anthropologist. But what happens if the new demand is to make ourselves legible to the machine? The most unsettling possibility is therefore not that A.I. models will fail to be trained and to be able to contain and reproduce the world's knowledge. It will undoubtedly contain more of it than any institution in human history.

The next epistemicide, if the term ever becomes appropriate, will not resemble book-burning or a language being prohibited. Perhaps nothing will technically disappear. The stories will still be stored somewhere; the recordings will remain on a server; the language will still be spoken in somebody's home.

They will simply sit on the other side of a new divide: the line between what a machine can turn into usable knowledge and what it cannot. We have spent a great deal of time asking whether artificial intelligence can learn to understand us. It seems at least as important to ask what kinds of people we will become after years of trying to make ourselves understandable to it. The danger of a single answer is not that somebody, somewhere, knows another one, it is that eventually we may stop noticing that another answer was possible. ■

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What kind of data-relational society do we want to build?

Agostina Coniglio

Imagine living in a country where 99% of public services are digitized. Today, most would view this as major technological achievement – or simply as the natural trajectory of a hyper-connected world. Global data suggest we are rapidly moving in this direction; in 2025, roughly 74% of the world's population (over 6 billion people) were online. Yet, the metrics we traditionally use to evaluate digital inclusion tell a far more complex story.

Technology has undoubtedly streamlined and enhanced daily life. We typically frame the quantification of human experience around convenience and utility. While valid, this narrative remains incomplete – it obscures the inherent risks, systemic limits, and less visible trade-offs embedded within these technologies.

Datafication begins with the information we voluntarily share, but it rapidly reaches the most private corners of daily life. Year after year, the volume of generated data expands exponentially, feeding sophisticated systems that primarily yield value for external actors. The adage "data is the new oil" overlooks a critical prerequisite. For data to exist as a resource, human life must first be extracted and converted into data points.

What is striking is how unremarkable this continuous conversion has become. Is the datafication of people a social phenomenon that we have simply ended up naturalizing?

Access to digital environments is traditionally equated with the opportunity to enjoy their benefits, assuming that greater technological deployment automatically fosters greater inclusion. However, viewing digital inequality strictly through the lens of the digital divide creates a misleading narrative; since it assumes that the mere absence of technology is the only driver of inequality. Reality is far more nuanced.

Exclusion, inclusion, and what comes next?

Across the Global South, physical access gaps persist, yet they alone no longer explain why inequality endures despite rising connectivity rates. According to data form ECLAC's Digital Development Observatory, while network expansion has brought most of the region online, severe disparities remain in connectivity quality, speed, and affordability – the essential prerequisites for meaningful socio-economic advancement. Consequently, the widespread adoption of smart devices and infrastructure has narrowed the physical access gap without eroding structural inequality or long -standing development divides.

The binary logic of inclusion versus exclusion fails to capture the complex power dynamics generated within digital ecosystems. The debate must shift from whether people access technology to the structural conditions governing that access – and our agency to shape them. While exclusion asks who participates, the concept of adverse digital incorporation compels us to question how they participate. This shifts the focus toward relational dynamics. That is to say an individual's position within the digital ecosystem; who captures the extracted value; and who ultimately bear the risks, costs, and systemic harms.

To address the root causes of inequality, digital justice must examine not only the outcomes of digital participation, but also the relational structures and decision-making power that generate them. Under what conditions does inclusion take place, and what renders those conditions equitable?

To unpack these dynamics, I propose the following framework.

A four-dimensional and interconnected framework:

1. Access

Contemporary perspectives agree that access alone is not enough to talk about digital inclusion. The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) formalized this shift through the concept of meaningful connectivity, encompassing six dimensions: quality, availability, affordability, devices, skills and safety.

Consider again a society where 99% public services are digitized. Even assuming universal access to devices, reliable connectivity and digital skills, can we guarantee that individuals engage on equal terms or achieve equitable outcomes? As digital participation becomes mandatory for accessing essential services and civic life, framing this inclusion as entirely "voluntary" becomes untenable.

Addressing this requires moving beyond a linear understanding of digital inequality. Rather than merely reflecting offline divides, pre-existing inequalities actively shape how individuals enter and navigate digital spaces. Conversely, the specific features of these technologies allow digital interactions to reinforce physical realities, amplifying existing disparities and giving rise to new ones.

If the relationship between technology and inequality is circular, digital inequality cannot be understood merely as a byproduct of exclusion. If this is the case; is meaningful access on its own, ever sufficient to guarantee just and equitable terms of inclusion?

2. Representation

Representation in digital spaces fundamentally addresses whether people are visible and how adequately they are recognized. While visibility is essential, digital engagement increasingly translates our existence into data – quantified into categories and profiles that dictate how we are perceived and treated. Who holds the authority to define these terms?

Under this framework, it would be a mistake to assume that greater digital visibility automatically ensures fair representation. The second dimension of this model highlights a core tension between having visibility and exercising control over it. A marginalized community may be excluded from datasets and rendered invisible; conversely, another group may be hyper-visible yet framed entirely through categories imposed by third parties. How can we determine if these representation terms are fair?

Data is *never* a neutral reflection of the physical world. Retaining control over one's own visibility – as well as participating in the design and logic of the technologies capturing it – is equally critical. Data is always about something or someone, and the decisions embedded in its design reflect specific worldviews. If complex social realities can be reduced to automated solutions, we risk treating people as mere objects withing digital systems, rather than recognizing them as agents capable of shaping their own representation.

Paradoxically, while privacy and data protection regulations remain essential, they fail to address the broader engineering driving datafication. Much of this infrastructure operates invisibly and horizontally – spanning public and private entities – and relies on data that can be manipulated in countless ways. Furthermore, digital tools are often framed as objective simple because automated systems apply uniform rules to everyone. However, this does not guarantee non-discriminatory outcomes if the underlying categories, datasets or assumptions mirror structural pre-existing inequalities.

When digitally generated categories inform real-world decision-making, they risk perpetuating and amplifying historical stereotypes. From this standpoint, cultural integrity involves more than just preserving heritage or identity against digitization; it requires retaining agency and self-determination throughout the digitization process itself. The question is: whose values,

knowledge, and worldviews are ultimately shaping digital identity?

3. Power Relations

The third-dimension frames digital systems as sets of power relationships embedded within technology – relationships driven by data extraction and the decisions governing its use.

If data is neither abstract nor neutral, and if the infrastructures designed to extract and re-purpose it serves those who fund, own and design them, then datafication lies at the intersection of power, knowledge and social organization.

At the same time, an increasing reliance on data blurs lines of accountability and transparency. When users grant digital consent, it creates an illusion of personal autonomy. The seamless nature of modern technology makes participation feel like an independent choice, even when the underlying terms are predetermined. When we are unaware of these structural conditions – or acutely aware that they cannot change them – how much autonomy does our decision truly carry in the end?

We may doubt whether the choices we make in the digital realm truly define us. In fact, taking social quantification for granted risks legitimizing asymmetric power structures without considering broader consequences. Hierarchical dynamics in digital spaces stem directly from these structural imbalances. Not all actors share equal access to data and the benefits derived from it, and lack equal literacy regarding how it is collected, processed, and used. Crucially, they lack equal leverage to negotiate the terms of their digital engagement.

Digital inequality goes beyond access; it concerns where communities can translate data into actionable knowledge, capture its value, and exercise decision-making power over it. Therefore, digital rights cannot be confined to individual privacy and data protection. What is our position withing these systems?

We are at once the producers of this "*new oil*", its users, its consumers, and eventually we become part of it. In this scenario, how much of the value we help generate can we actually capture or govern? Being consulted users or consenting data generators is not necessarily equivalent to exercising authority over the ends and benefits of datafication.

These power asymmetries become evident when the benefits, risks and consequences of datafication are distributed unequally— often becoming more pronounced when they intersect with pre-existing vulnerabilities to impact the most marginalized communities. How, then, is the power to set the terms of digital participation distributed and exercised?

4. Agency

The authorship of our own digital experience becomes questionable when the terms governing it are defined by actors whose capabilities vastly exceed our own. That raises a fundamental question. What real agency do we possess to influence these conditions?

Communication rights offer a robust human rights framework to address this question through the lens of digital justice. This perspective is grounded in the interconnected exercise of established fundamental rights – including freedom of expression, access to information, civic participation, and privacy, alongside cultural rights. For some communities, this framework extends to specific rights tied to self-determination, cultural heritage and prior informed consultation. Participation in digital spaces should therefore unfold under conditions that guarantee the effective exercise of these rights.

Nonetheless, participating does not necessarily imply having authority, just as having a voice does not automatically translate into exercising influence. Thus, while communication rights provide a critical framework for evaluating digital inclusion, a central question remains. What capacity do we actually have to exercise these rights and meaningfully shape the terms of our participation? Does inclusion in digital environments equate to genuine influence over their design and governance?

True agency requires the capacity to make decision, express needs and perspectives, questioning existing terms and actively impact structural outcomes. Mere consultation regarding pre-established terms is inherently limiting. Genuine agency encompasses the power to shape, govern and contest digital systems.

How we understand this capacity depends on the angle from which we seek to exercise it. From the standpoint of digital infrastructure, it means the ability to build, adapt, and govern digital architectures. At the data level is refers to active participation on how data is encoded, represented and repurposed into knowledge. At the governance level, effective participation spans a broader spectrum – influencing how systems and data are used, their purposes and benefits, and sustaining that decision-making power throughout the entire data lifecycle.

From this perspective, cultural integrity acquires a vital dimension of agency. Beyond preserving traditions, knowledge, or identities in the face of digitization, we must retain and exercise the capacity for self-determination throughout the process itself. Ultimately, we must ask ourselves, what kind of data-relational society do we truly want to build? One that expands the exercise of our rights into the digital realm, or one that ends up restricting and conditioning them?

Shaping our digital future: Conclusions

Human rights stem from the recognition of human dignity and autonomy. In increasingly datafied societies, self-determination acquired renewed urgency. As individuals and part of communities we must retain the capacity to shape our lives, identities and futures within the digital realm.

Digital self-determination encompasses both individual and a collective dimension. Much like physical reality, the digital experience has a singular dimension while also embedding collective decisions, shared knowledge, cultural identities and common interests. These interconnected dimensions are especially critical for vulnerable and marginalized communities facing the asymmetries of the digital world—particularly when entering digital spaces under unequal conditions.

This framework requires projecting our capacity to respect, integrate and realize rights, interests and expectations within digital ecosystems, ensuring that participation is mutually beneficial for all involved and extends across the entire data lifecycle.

As human existence becomes continuously datafied, the conditions governing fair digital participation concern us all – even as our starting points and exposure to systemic risks remain unequal. This reality should compel us to critically examine what truly means to build, exercise, and stand for self-determination within that digital age. ▪

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Locarno (Switzerland) 2026

The Prize of the Ecumenical Jury at the 79th Locarno Film Festival went to *Nun Dul Dega Eomne* (Nowhere to Lay My Eyes) directed by Hong Sangsoo (South Korea). The film centres on Sanghee, who, together with her brother, visits her mother in the South Korean city of Jeju – for the first time in ten years. Her mother runs a successful restaurant there. Sanghee's stepfather is making a film about a "grass grave", and his daughter has taken up painting. They exchange news, unsolicited advice and insincere compliments. On the morning of their departure, the other family members watch a film made by Sanghee.

The Ecumenical Jury selected the film *Nun Dul Dega Eomne* for its extraordinary human depth. "What do we focus on in our lives? Do we see the obvious or the invisible? How do we tell a story of truth?" *Nun Dul Dega Eomne* takes us on a brief journey to a family reunion where expectations and relationships can be rekindled. The dialogues unfold like precious pearls of universal and existential themes, offering an intense reflection on creativity and art.

Members of the 2026 Ecumenical Jury: Viera Pirker, Germany (Chair); Juha Rajamäki, Finland; Sarah Stutte, Switzerland; and Jean-Luc Gadreau, France.

Miskolc (Hungary) 2026

At the 22nd Miskolc International Film Festival (4-12 September 2026), the Ecumenical Jury awarded its Prize to *Prosecution* (Staatsschutz) directed by Faraz Shariat (Germany, 2026).

Motivation: This movie shows us how western societies are now at a crossroads, threatened by extreme and radical thoughts and violence. In this context, neutrality would mean accepting the current situation and is not a solution. Our protagonist gives us the example of how to act, be engaged, stand up for human rights and dignity, and to defend democratic values and institutions. The director, Faraz Shariat, uses a cinematographic language that embodies the urgency and gravity of today's stakes using thriller, western and crime codes, delivering an intense and impressive movie.

Members of the 2026 Jury: Beáta Kézdi (Hungary, President of the Jury); Endre Dyekiss (Hungary); Adrien Fondecave (France); Michael Otrisal (Czech Republic).

Venice (Italy) 2026

At the 83rd Venice International Film Festival (2-12 September 2026), the 15th INTERFILM Award for Promoting Interreligious Dialogue went to *Un bon petit soldat* directed by Stéphane Brizé (France).

Motivation: Carla Moretti, brilliantly portrayed by Alba Rohrwacher, is consumed by her work at an insurance company and communicates with her son only through a mobile phone. The film holds up a mirror to the hypocrisy of a workplace culture that preaches inclusion, humanity and joy while rewarding competition, productivity and profit. With great intensity and stylistic coherence, it exposes the ethical contradictions of capitalism. The film issues a heartfelt appeal to all who watch it: this is how humanity is lost – a challenge to our Christian conscience. By exposing the contradictions of our prevailing value system, it invites us to reconsider what – and whom – we choose to value.

Members of the 2026 Jury: Pascale Huber, Switzerland (President); Dietmar Adler, Germany; Chiara Clini, Italy; Maggie Morgan, Egypt.