Upholding Human Rights and Advancing Social Justice in the Digital Age

CAMECO's 50th Anniversary International Conference
28-29 November 2019

This presentation addresses:

What are some of the implications of digital transformation on human rights and social justice?

How do we respond?

Caveat: this is a discussion, not the answer!

Presenter: Sara Speicher, Deputy General Secretary, World Association for Christian Communication

WACC is an international development organization that promotes communication as a basic human right, one that is essential to people's dignity and sense of community.

Rooted in the Christian faith, WACC works with all those denied the right to communicate because of status, identity, or gender.

To be clear about the perspective of WACC on this topic: WACC believes communication is an essential human right, central to the functioning of all individuals and human societies.

WACC advocates full access to information and communication, and promotes open and diverse media.

WACC strengthens networks of communicators to advance peace, understanding and justice.

WACC's development work draws on a framework of **Communication Rights.**

But more than just functioning, full access to all forms of communication is required for social justice – for each of us, as individuals and communities to participate fully and equally in society. Thus WACC's work is based on the concept of communication rights.
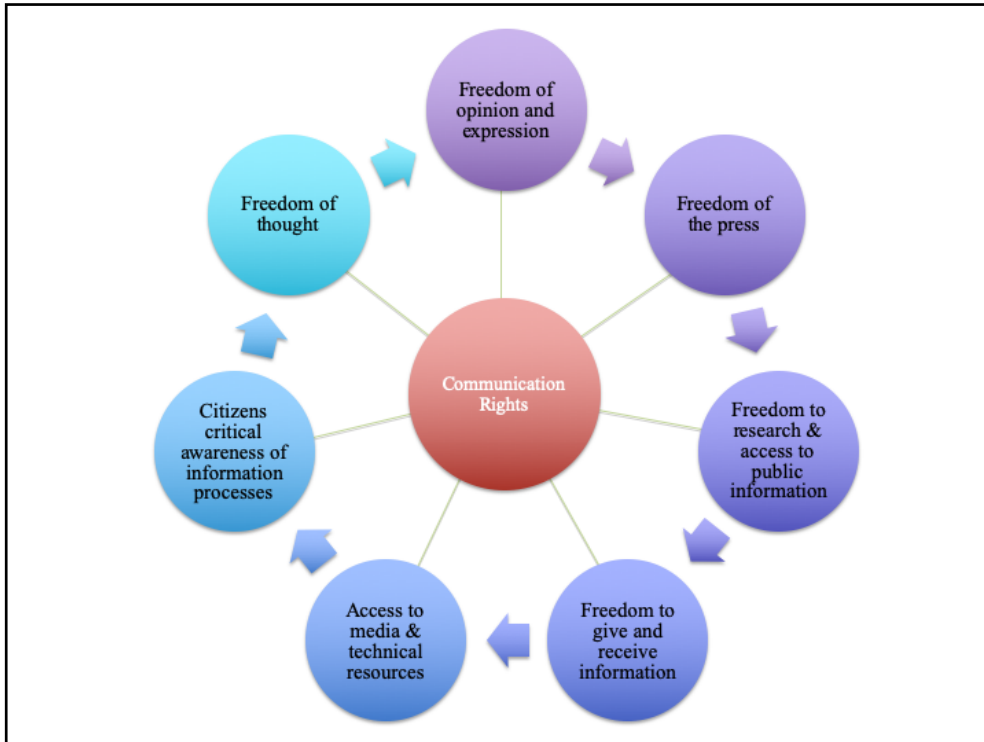
➢Communication rights enable all people everywhere to express themselves individually and collectively by all means of communication.

For WACC, communication rights lies at the heart of greater social justice and good governance, whose key attributes are transparency, responsibility, accountability, participation and responsiveness to the needs of the people. Freedom of expression and opinion is often said to underlie democracy and good governance.

While Freedom of Expression is most often and easily recognized as a right – as Article 19 in the universal Declaration - this is only one of the rights expressed in international covenants. And what is more, and significant for addressing digital transformation, communication rights need to be seen in relationship to each other.

Potential of the digital age?

Photos: Paul Jeffrey (2) and Joel Carillet/ACT Alliance

What is our gut feeling about the increasingly vast implications of the digital transformation? Do we see first the potential for previously marginalized people and communities having a voice, exposing injustice, empowered by information?

Or do we find the digital transformation increasingly intrusive and taking over ever aspect of our lives, ruled by a few incredibly powerful tech giants, destabilizing democratic society and capitalizing on increasing stores of data to modify our political and consumer behavior?

The reality of course is something in between.

> ## How do we respect freedom of expression and opinion when we seem to be surrounded by deliberate disinformation, online abuse, and hate speech?

There are more questions than answers. Here are a few.

We have seen, in abusive hate speech for instance, that the defence of "freedom of expression" has in effect denied others the same freedom.

- Women less likely to post online because of virulent abuse

Prioritizing social justice ensures that protecting a full range of rights provides an environment in which freedom of expression may be fully exercised. - Right to education, to peaceful assembly, to the protection of one's language, etc..

The litmus test is our social justice lens – is it freedom of expression and opinion for all, especially the vulnerable and marginalized in society?

How do we address freedom of information – a right that originally addressed the scarcity of information - when we are in a situation of information overload?
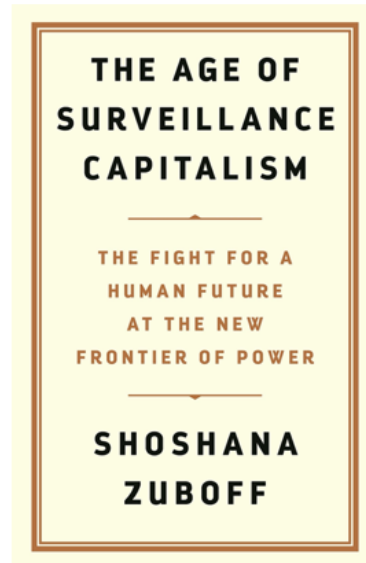
We know that in some countries access to information has always been heavily censored, and today in a number of countries access to the Internet is controlled and content is censored. But there is also a new method which is deliberate overload.

How do we promote freedom of the press when digital platforms allow anyone to set themselves up as a "media agency" and disseminate "news", accurate or not?

The relative ease and low cost of setting up an online media service has both contributed to the proliferation of "fake news" but also siphoned advertising and other revenue from established media agencies.

How do we support the accessibility of digital communication channels for the public good when "free" services actually commodify our personal data for huge corporate profit?

THE AGE OF SURVEILLANCE CAPITALISM

THE FIGHT FOR A HUMAN FUTURE AT THE NEW FRONTIER OF POWER

SHOSHANA ZUBOFF

Remember especially with digital products: When something is free, you (and your data) are the price.

How do we promote freedom of thought and informed participation when digital platforms promote echo chambers?

Social media has made us more connected than ever.

But there is the danger that we retreat even further into our groups of like-minded people. There are also companies who specifically take personal data and use it for targeted advertisements and messages that will most appeal to you – in the hope to guide your behaviour.

Key words

- Accessibility
- Affordability
- Equality/equity
- Diversity
- Participation
- Connectedness
- Accountability

Essential principles we need to apply in our reflection and response

How is WACC responding?

- Working together: sharing developments and perspectives from faith and civil society, media, academics, grassroots communities and networks
- Community project support: Communication rights in a digital age
- Regional conversations and perspectives
- 2020 Symposium (October/November): Communication and Social Justice in the Digital Age
- Advocacy campaign

Political, cultural and civil society actors are all struggling to respond effectively. What is still lacking is a comprehensive approach, based on social justice, to the challenges and opportunities of the digital age.

This is the basis for the planned 2020 Symposium: A broad range of sectors will be represented in the discussion, building on WACC's wide-ranging networks and its position at the intersection of civil society, media, academia, ecumenical organizations, and political decision-makers.

It will be an opportunity collectively to explore the challenges with a social justice lens, and to identify opportunities to advocate for democratic digital transformation. Furthermore, it will provide a platform to launch concerted actions to claim and enact digital rights and responsibilities. Together, we can change our digital world for the better.

How do we respond together?

There are a lot of initiatives that try to address the challenges and problems; last week I was at a conference in Berlin that launched a Digital Rights Manifesto that was a strong civil society platform on the appropriate use of our data, particularly from an economic perspective.

Tim Berners Lee has launched "the contract for the web" that would govern the behaviour of tech giants and states.

EU has guidelines.

Where the system is based on speed and power, we have to be grounded and resilient through our faith and ethics – human rights and social justice.

To me it is clear we need as society to invest in digital media literacy, based on human rights and values

But more, We need to "unleash" the collective power of the faith communities – as leaders of influence and as grassroots citizens – to counter the massive power and wealth driving the digital transformation.

of the tech giants. We need to be advocates for appropriate standards with

enforcement – for tech companies and government and political interest groups.

None of the major changes in favour of human rights and sustainable development that have occurred over the past several decades could have been achieved without building collective power - "advocates speaking not just as individuals, or through particular organizations, but with a powerful, collective voice.

A digital transformation that serves all of humanity

[end]