

**Seminar: What Makes Us So Angry?
Hate speech, fake news, and communication rights**

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“Communication Rights in a Divided World”

By Philip Lee, General Secretary, World Association for Christian Communication

I shall begin by offering a brief overview of communication rights from the point of view of WACC, and then draw on the work of one of my distinguished colleagues in the field of communication ethics.

[POWERPOINT PRESENTATION]

WACC publishes a quarterly journal called *Media Development* – of which I am editor – and its first issue in 2019 was titled “Brave New Digital World”. I invited Dr Clifford G. Christians, former director of the Institute of Communications Research and chair of the doctoral program in communications at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA, to give an overview of the ethical challenges posed by today’s digital technologies. In doing so, he inadvertently identified the kinds of *division* I was asked to address in this presentation. He wrote:

“The explosive growth of the digital media gives us communication abundance, but the complications and contradictions are cooling our enthusiasm. Schools teach computer literacy, while terrorists on four continents use online networks to coordinate planning. The growth of sectarianism and fundamentalism is making stable governments nearly impossible. Finance and banking are the most advanced information systems in history; they led the world into an economic depression. The new technological landscape has created unprecedented opportunities for expression and interaction, while the elementary distinction between fact and fiction erodes. The unlimited amount of electronic data is a golden resource for public information, but management techniques by governments and business redirect big data toward surveillance and consumerism.”¹

In short, as with every new technological innovation, there are pros and cons, advantages and disadvantages, benefits and risks. I am reminded of nanotechnology, which is playing a revolutionary role in almost every aspect of daily life. On the one hand, there are **water filters made of silver nanoparticles** that can remove virtually all viruses and bacteria. Such cost-efficient, portable water treatment systems are ideal for improving the quality of drinking water in emerging countries. On the other hand, in the field of nano medicine, toxicologists are concerned with the environmental and health effects of extensive exposure to materials or particles with a diameter of less than 100 nanometres. To put that measurement in perspective, an ant is 5 million nanometres long.

In today’s digital world, many people conduct their personal and professional lives online: acquiring knowledge but also sharing personal data and content via social networking and online data storage. People *depend* on information and communications technologies to connect them to the world. This **increased interconnectedness** creates opportunities to share information, but it also creates new risks and ethical dilemmas that affect human rights, particularly concerning what is shared, with whom, and how personal data are stored and

accessed. Human rights online, or digital rights, are considered an extension of human rights in this digital context and the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) has often stated that “the same rights that people have offline must be also protected online”.²

At the same time, the advancement of the ICT sector and digital technology has had many positive effects on the exercise of human rights, in particular for the right to freedom of opinion and expression, which includes the right to acquire and disseminate information, and the right to communicate. This digital empathy has increased unlawful conduct by governments and service providers along the ICT service chain that can infringe people’s rights and increase **digital vulnerability**. Potential abuses include disrupting or completely shutting down systems, the misuse of information for surveillance, censoring speech, deleting or blocking data, and the forced distribution of politically motivated messages via network operators.

And speaking of digital vulnerability, according to a study commissioned by the European Parliament:

“Cyber violence and hate speech online against women occurs on a variety of platforms: social media, web content and discussion sites, search engines, messaging services, blogs, dating websites and apps, comment sections of media and newspapers, forums, chat rooms of online video games, etc. Research shows that women are specifically targeted by cyber violence and that age and gender are significant factors in the prevalence of cyber violence. Young women are particularly under threat of sexual harassment and stalking. Cyber violence infringes women’s fundamental rights and freedoms, their dignity and equality and impacts their lives at all levels.”³

And then there is “**surveillance capitalism**”, which works by providing free services that billions of people cheerfully and unthinkingly use, enabling the providers of those services to monitor the behaviour of those users in astonishing detail – often without their explicit consent.

Where to from here?

When we speak of communication rights in a divided world, we need to consider political, economic, and cultural challenges at global, national, and local levels. In this respect, there are no “one size fits all” solutions. That said, a crosscutting concern is *shrinking public spaces* for communication where digital technologies are expected to play an enlarging role. In fact, on the 30th anniversary of the World Wide Web, its founder Sir Tim Berners-Lee called for **a better web that serves all of humanity**. He urged:

- * Governments to translate laws and regulations for the digital age. “They must ensure markets remain competitive, innovative and open. And they have a responsibility to protect people’s rights and freedoms online.”
- * Companies to do more to ensure their pursuit of short-term profit is not at the expense of human rights, democracy, scientific fact or public safety. “Platforms and products must be designed with privacy, diversity and security in mind.”
- * Citizens to hold companies and governments accountable “for the commitments they make, and demand that both respect the web as a global community with citizens at its heart.”

Shrinking public spaces compound the challenges posed by digital technologies that affect the communication rights of people worldwide. In his article in *Media Development*, Clifford G. Christians characterizes these challenges as follows:

1) In terms of the ethical principle of just distribution of products and services, media access ought to be available to everyone according to essential needs, regardless of income or geographical location. Comprehensive information ought to be assured to all parties without discrimination.

2) Political empire was an issue with print technology and it remains for digital ethics today. Print enabled governments to standardize, administer and hold accountable their political regimes. With digital technology, the empire problem means state surveillance in unprecedented terms.

3) The paradox of media complexity. In the profusion of blogging technology, deep structures and sources are easily hidden and difficult to recover. The interactive character of this technology requires ethical principles that are appropriate to it, instead of following the linear objectivity of print and broadcast.

4) Another new issue in the computer-driven digital age is global citizenship. The character of citizenship has always been a concern for public life; but in a world of networked digital media the nature of global citizenship is a concern for communication ethics.

5) The longstanding issue of violence in television and cinema is compounded by interactive violence in video games, and made nearly unmanageable by the 40,000 to 60,000 web-based hate sites scattered around the globe.

6) The ethics of privacy was a major moral issue during the print and broadcasting eras and remains so in today's world where podcasts, blogs, mobile phones, and social networking sites are increasingly used to publicize personal and intimate information within the so-called anonymity of the digital environment.

7) The issues of pornography were not resolved during the eras when print and broadcast technologies were dominant, and the abundance of pornography online complicates any resolution now.

8) The ethics of representation faces the demand to specify how gender, ethnicity, and class are symbolized in networked cyberspace. This issue continues in the digital, complicated by the contradictory trends of cultural homogeneity and resistance to it.

This is a pretty heavy agenda. But to sum up, three universal principles remain that should shape and define communication rights in a digitally divided world. They are **truth, human dignity, and non-violence**.

To which we should add WACC's own guiding [Principles](#):

- * Communication is a spiritual exercise
- * Communication builds and shapes community
- * Communication enhances participation
- * Communication promotes freedom and demands accountability

- * Communication celebrates cultural diversity
- * Communication builds connectedness
- * Communication affirms justice and challenges injustice

Notes

1. Clifford G. Christians. "New digital technology and global communication ethics". *Media Development* 1/2019.
2. UN Human Rights Council, "The promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet," A/HRC/32/L.20, (27 June 2016), available at: <https://goo.gl/QeUkDX>
3. *Cyber violence and hate speech online against women* (2018) Study commissioned by the European Parliament's Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs at the request of the FEMM Committee.

Philip Lee is General Secretary of the [World Association for Christian Communication](#) (WACC), which promotes communication as a basic human right, essential to people's dignity and community. He is also editor of the international journal [Media Development](#). His publications include *Requiem: Here's Another Fine Mass You've Gotten Me Into* (2001); *Many Voices, One Vision: The Right to Communicate in Practice* (ed.) (Southbound, 2004); *Communicating Peace: Entertaining Angels Unawares* (ed.) (Southbound, 2008), and *Public Memory, Public Media and the Politics of Justice* (co-ed. with Pradip N. Thomas) (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). In 2013, he was conferred Doctor of Divinity (honoris causa) by the Academy of Ecumenical Indian Theology and Church Administration in Chennai, India.