

“Where freedom is threatened, speech is threatened”

Challenges for communication rights in the 21st century

“It is no coincidence that whenever intellect is seen as a danger, the first move is to ban books and impose strict censorship on newspapers, magazines and radio broadcasts; you can pack enough dynamite between the lines – on the printer’s tiny line of fire – to blow up entire worlds.”

“Language as a refuge of freedom” was the title

Heinrich Böll gave this speech, which he delivered in Wuppertal, Germany, in 1959. Throughout his literary life, this keen awareness of the freedom of communication remained a guideline for his writing and his actions.

Böll, a devout Catholic – albeit one who turned his back on the Church later in life – derived a mission from his own survival of the war: *“I pray to God to heal me, and then – then, I will not raise the dead ... No, I want to sing a song to the murdered.”*

Böll took this mission to speak for the murdered, the silenced voices and those sentenced to wordlessness seriously: he spoke out against the “inflammatory climate” in West Germany when the conservative Springer newspaper publishing house first targeted the student uprising of 1968, and later Böll personally. He supported dissidents in Russia and Czechoslovakia, and – for people like me who grew up behind the Iron Curtain – he was a lighthouse of credibility. Printing presses – and even typewriters – were worth their weight in gold in East Germany, and by the age of 16, I had learned to touch-type at high speed. And I typed with a vengeance, copying books and magazines that had been smuggled into the East. I illegally took for myself the communication rights that I had been denied.

Today I work for the Heinrich Böll Foundation, which has 33 offices around the world. The foundation focuses on supporting and working with people in their struggle for freedom and rights. Political lobbying

for those whose rights are being violated and whose voices have been silenced is a key part of our mission.

And that's why I'm very pleased to be here – it's a great honor for me to congratulate you on your 50th anniversary.

1968, the year WACC was founded, was a pivotal one in the East and the West, throughout Europe and beyond, especially in terms of communication freedom. To attain knowledge, to break taboos, and to imagine and express alternatives to the politics and culture of the day was, after all, the ultimate goal of the students who took to the streets in 1968, their sometimes eccentric theoretical underpinnings notwithstanding. In the East, it was about freedom as a whole – freedom of thought and life, and freedom from censorship. The student protests in Warsaw in March 1968, for example, had been triggered by one specific event: the ban on the performance of a play by national poet Adam Mickiewicz.

It's surely no coincidence that WACC was founded at precisely this time of upheaval, of a global cultural transformation further driven by the liberation movements in colonized parts of the world.

Looking at the media landscape in West Germany in the year WACC was founded, a strong monopolization is evident: there were two public television channels with one regional program, a similar situation in the radio landscape, and a small number of opinion-shaping papers in the print sector. Not least because of this monopolistic press experience, activists of the student movement founded their own newspaper in 1978 and simply called it *Tageszeitung* – “Daily Paper”.

The WACC Europe group was also established in this turbulent period, and I am sure that the spirit of new beginnings and creative possibilities – in Western Europe, at any rate – was inspiring for the founding meeting in 1975, at which Robert Geisendörfer described the decision to create the regional group as a declaration “that we

believe Europe has a future and that we want to take part in shaping that future”.

The next exciting and incisive period for WACC was the fight for a new, more just and more efficient world information and communication order.

The McBride report of 1980, entitled “Many Voices, One World”, already reveals the themes and issues of emerging globalization. But while the 1960s and 1970s had been a time of successful liberation movements from colonialist domination, the world was still shaped by the order of the Cold War at that time. The tough struggle for a new order in the world of knowledge and communication showed that the superpowers were by no means prepared to give up media power. They wanted to keep control over communication – whoever controls the media and access to them controls the people.

Only nine years later, the world order of the time broke down with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the communist regimes. Millions of people who had been subject to a state information policy behind the Iron Curtain – a policy that used information, and above all the withholding of information, as a means of repression – were now able to communicate freely. The variety of media – print, radio and TV – increased; new, independent media outlets were founded, many of them were soon discontinued. Faith-based media were able to develop, and the time of gray literature was over. But not everyone could really appreciate the new freedom. Some withdrew, seeing Christianity as a way of circling the wagons, and deeming the idea of human rights as too Western, too Protestant, too liberal and too individualistic.

The Ukrainian civil rights activist, dissident and theologian Myroslav Marynovych, who currently teaches at the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv, describes the spectrum as follows: “The idea of human rights is perceived by the faithful of the Eastern Churches of Ukraine for the most part as a Western, foreign idea – one that is too

liberal, individualistic and Protestant. While the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church made the support of basic human rights an electoral test for its faithful in the Ukrainian presidential election, the Ukrainian Orthodox clergy flatly rejected any reference to religious freedom and human rights."

We see contradictions and breaks in Christian attitudes here that explain why in certain contexts – Russia, for example – the close alliance between new totalitarianism and dogmatic determination works and prevents precisely what McBride said in his report and later, in 1982 in his lecture at the WACC conference: "Freedom of information and more specifically the right to seek, to receive and impart information is a fundamental human right, indeed a prerequisite for many other human rights."

It is remarkable that McBride defined communication as a human right: a radical idea whose actual implementation and enforcement – as I see it – is yet to be realized, but which will be of central importance in the dawning age of communication in the 21st century.

We must note here that the relationship between freedom of religion and communication rights is by no means easy, and that it also requires debate and conviction within the Christian spectrum.

The long history and ongoing relevance of these topics underscore one thing: WACC is important, and if this network with its ideas, impulses, prescience and special focus on vulnerable groups did not yet exist, we certainly would have to invent it. The emancipative approach that flows from a Christian identity is compatible with any approach, initiative or organization that cares about the protection of human rights and human dignity and that dignifies those whose voices are not heard or acknowledged.

WACC has also recognized that it is not enough just to support grassroots actors on the ground, but that advocacy work is needed at the level of the UN and other international organizations to focus

attention on the lack of rights and ensure that communication rights are enshrined in international initiatives such as the MDGs and SDGs. This is where WACC's great merits lie.

What could be its work fields and achievements in the future?

The field in which WACC is active – communication – is experiencing an unparalleled, profound transformation. And while Geisendörfer in 1975 certainly could not have imagined the dissolution of the boundaries of communication that we are experiencing today, he was very prescient with regard to the field in which WACC is active:

“The association which we are establishing today has yet another dimension in addition to our common Christian heritage and our political commitment: it is a witness to our conviction that communication must be taken as a whole.”

To see communication as a whole, something that permeates the entire world of life, from the private sphere to communities, societies and states – something that is not distinct from other areas, but which exerts a profound influence on them, is rooted in them and links them to one another, is an essential prerequisite to understanding today's communication contexts.

We look back on a rapid transformation of the means of communication: in the post-war period of the 1950s, books and radio programs and a number of major daily newspapers held a monopoly position – what they voiced was the prevailing opinion.

At the latest, the advent of private television – in Germany, at any rate – changed the landscape of the opinion leaders and broke their monopoly. And with the rise of the internet, the former gatekeepers of communication lost their dominant position entirely. This has had two major effects: firstly, the internet has led to a tremendous acceleration of communication. While it used to be said that nothing is older than yesterday's news, we could now say the same about the news from an hour ago.

Secondly, our perspective has shifted from the national to the global level. Taken together, this means that things that happen anywhere on the planet are registered in real time around the world. In addition to the speed and ubiquity of the news, a third factor comes into play: each and every one of us is not just a consumer, but also a producer of news. One would think that this would have led to democratization. Paradoxically, however, the opposite has happened. The dismantling of media monopolies has promoted the emergence of parallel societies in the digital media world.

While the “journalistically curated” mass media of the pre-digital era were characterized by gatekeepers restricting or blocking access, 21st century social media is developing a new form of publicity and discourse culture that is by no means less problematic. Hate-speech attacks, fake news and racist views make it clear that curating and regulating this newly-created public space is the order of the day.

The new, algorithm-driven public sphere exists on a continuum to earlier private media in that it relies on entertainment and emotion, as well as loaded evaluations and devaluations of things, people and groups of people. This can increase to the point of defamation and insults and statements that no longer stay within the lanes of democratic discourse.

Thorough research, the protection of minorities and empathy with them fall by the wayside.

The emotional charge that leaves no room for either facts or empathy can be well illustrated with the subject of migration:

In 2015 – the year in which 800,000 refugees came to Germany – the German finance minister at the time, Wolfgang Schäuble, fueled the “refugee crisis” debate by using the term “refugee avalanche”. This emotionally charged, pejorative term spread like wildfire through the social media, where it was hotly debated. While some felt vindicated, the others took offense and called Schäuble an intellectual firebrand. Here it was possible to observe something that

has solidified over the past three years: with the active involvement of politicians, vulnerable groups have been described as a force of nature that needs to be controlled.

Empathy with people who have suffered terrible things, who have risked their lives to escape to safety? Nil. Those people are not present in the filter bubbles of social networks anyway, and so the parallel societies of the internet are filled with empty debates among participants who for the most part are unlikely to have had any personal contact with a refugee.

Social media is changing the structure of social public life. The media researcher Cajo Thimm says: “Large platforms such as Facebook and Twitter in particular enable a worldwide exchange that supports completely distinct audiences, independent of the major paths of media diffusion. The intensive use of social media has consequences for political information, for political participation and thus also for the development of democracy”. In other words, social media change, and even intensify, the mandate to stand up for communication rights.

Of course, the pre-digital mass media such as newspapers, radio and television still exist, but they mediate less and less between the different milieus and between civil society and political decision-makers.

The great potential of digital media is that they also offer political, religious and social countercultures opportunities to articulate their interests and to give themselves a voice.

Two different options arise from this:

On the one hand, the demonopolization of communication gives rise to the hope that marginalized groups can have more influence on the democratic shaping of their societies – good examples of this are the Arab spring, or regional and local protests by young people who have little access to established media. Or consider the #metoo campaign,

which triggered worldwide reactions and catapulted the taboo topic of sexual violence to the forefront of global public attention, and in the process forcing the traditional media to address it. Here, people – primarily women – have successfully exercised their communication rights. Such a public process would have been unthinkable in the pre-digital era.

On the other hand, however, the demonopolization of communication has led to structural problems to which I have already alluded: it is no longer clear who is curating social media content, where it originates, and whether it is true. But truth is a basic prerequisite for ethically founded, democratically oriented discourse. When people no longer trust the information that is disseminated, they no longer trust anyone, and with that, the basis for democratic coexistence disappears.

However, a number of broad lines are emerging in the brave new world of communication between hope and horror that will be at least as difficult to overcome as breaking the monopoly of the mass media:

In the US, 38% of internet users get their news exclusively through social media. The providers of these media use certain algorithms to control which information gets to whom – a phenomenon for which Eli Pariser coined the term “filter bubble” as early as 2011. Today, in the wake of the Facebook and Cambridge Analytica scandal, we know how algorithms are capable of influencing political and even voting behavior.

Of course, it was also possible to manipulate people in the past. Preventing manipulation via mass media and anchoring ethical standards in the media was one of the most important founding impulses for the precursors of WACC after World War II. Today, it is apparent that these standards must be transferred to a completely new sphere, and we do not yet know exactly how this can be

achieved, because filter bubbles are not the only issue: self-chosen echo chambers are a further problem.

People who are drowning in a flood of communication create comfort zones for themselves and would rather not be disturbed by critical or challenging opinions. Christians are not immune to this, either. The less present they are in the liberal spectrum, the more tightly closed their echo chamber becomes. This however, gives rise to the fragmented public spheres that are so dangerous for democratic discourse, and incidentally also dangerous for the debate on what exactly Christian behavior means today.

The ideal vision of public discourse is that everyone contributes their opinions and comments, and that this content condenses into a public opinion. But if the flow of communication is disturbed because the broad public has broken down into unconnected partial public spheres, then society itself breaks down. An idea of what is beneficial to the common good can no longer be formed in this way.

All in all, this rapid change in communication has created the challenge of establishing a new digital value system. In this respect, WACC, after fifty years, is only just getting started: digital communication must also be understood in a holistic manner and imbued with ethical standards and democratic participation.

A number of European parliamentarians and personalities have prompted a debate on a framework of digital values by proposing a Charter of Digital Fundamental Rights of the European Union. For Europe, they recommend a catalog of values for the digital world based on applicable human rights standards.

Article 2 states: "Every person has the right to freedom of information and communication. This includes the personal right not to know."

In other words, WACC's core concern of securing people's communication rights remains of paramount importance in digital communication.

While the debate about a new communication order in the wake of colonialism still revolved around accessibility and affordability in the 1960s and 1970s, today it is about accountability, empathy and digital fairness or digital participation.

In this context, digital participation, especially with a view to vulnerable groups worldwide, is of particular importance.

What I have described as the hope that marginalized groups will have a voice and can actively influence the political process does not exist in many regions of the world. In Arab countries, Turkey, Russia, Belarus, Azerbaijan and their neighboring states in particular, but also in sub-Saharan Africa, the apparent freedom of the internet is a distant dream.

NGOs – whether faith-based or otherwise – that uncover corruption, report on social grievances, promote empowerment or stand up for their rights, are increasingly becoming targets of attacks.

Independent journalists, for whom digital publishing is the only remaining option, are arrested and silenced. Recent examples are the many detained Turkish journalists or their colleagues in Afghanistan who, after the attack that cost the lives of 10 international journalists, courageously carry on without letting themselves be intimidated by Taliban terror.

The new digital spaces, which can offer opportunities for networking and information in repressive states in particular, are increasingly being monitored, manipulated and censored. Wherever the legal framework for freedom and diversity of opinion is lacking, digital participation also suffers.

Even worse, repressive states with their secret services and non-state terrorists use the internet for propaganda purposes: the information war that Russia is waging in eastern Ukraine is just as much a part of this as the videos that radical IS fighters use to lure like-minded people into deadly combat.

Unfortunately, the number of countries that are clamping down on freedom of expression and information and democratic scope for action is increasing rather than decreasing: in terms of restrictions, China tops the list. For the past 20 years, Chinese internet users have had to register with the Ministry of State Security and internet operators are monitored by the state.

In Central and Eastern Europe – even in democratically governed countries – we are witnessing a different phenomenon: large, professional media organizations, as we know them in Central Europe and the US, are not viable. In Eastern Europe’s media markets, far too many outlets are competing for very few users. Georgia alone, with its population of less than four million, has 138 TV stations and 21 radio stations. Add to this the fact that the private, competing media outlets reflect the political positions of their owners and thus provide biased content rather than independent reporting. The result is a loss of credibility for all media. The internet does not really offer a solution, but adds to the oversupply and does not compensate for the lost credibility.

In summary, digital fairness is a goal worth working toward. Accessibility should also be a factor at all times: poorly-educated women living in underdeveloped countries are hardly able to access information via the internet, be it due to a lack of technical resources or lack of education.

While technical access is a factor, there is more: we must succeed in establishing ground rules for communication in the digital public sphere that enable minorities and vulnerable groups to exchange views and make themselves heard. The same goes for mechanisms to counter fake news and prioritize true empathy over quick emotions and a culture of indignation that quickly descends into violence. The forces of democracy and public welfare must stand together in the fight to build credibility and trust in the digital media world. Digital participation is not a luxury or merely nice to have, but a prerequisite

for the development of inclusive societies. Free access to information and unhindered opportunities to disseminate it form the backbone of democratic, open and prosperous societies.

One thing is clear: the direct interaction of access to communication on the one hand and democratic diversity and stability on the other remains intact in the digital age. This has been a matter of course for WACC for the past 50 years. Applying the right to communication to the digital world and redefining it will be crucial in the 21st century.

For the next 50 years of your work, I wish you the greatest possible impact, many good partners, and above all, God's blessing!

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Enabling People and Communities to Be Heard, WACC 12