The No-Nonsense Guide to
Communication Rights and the Internet

With over half the world's population now connected to the Internet, we are witnessing opportunities to use digital communication for social justice. But we are also seeing the Internet used for private profit and political power, which has led to censorship, fragmentation, and violence. How can applying "communication rights" help us understand the problems, and possible solutions, to these challenges?

Communication is indispensable

Communication is an essential human need and indispensable to the functioning of human societies. Without it, no individual or community can exist or prosper. Communication enables meanings to be exchanged, impels people to act, and makes them who and what they are.[1]

As communication is mediated by technologies and influential media institutions, our understanding of reality and public agendas partly depends on the way media and communication ecosystems[2] are organized and regulated. A media and communication ecosystem that is not transparent and democratic allows unscrupulous actors to manipulate the public, disseminate information in ways that advance their interests over the public good, and undemocratically control public agendas.

Two young Indonesian women with their smartphone.
Photo Credit: Simon Chambers/ACT Alliance

A media and communication ecosystem based on principles such as freedom, equality, and solidarity can help enable everyone to fully enjoy their human rights, allow for greater individual liberty, and promote a stronger sense of belonging and collective collaboration[3].

It is precisely because communication is fundamental to human life that control of communication and information is linked to the exercise of power in society.

Beyond freedom of expression

Given the centrality of interpersonal and social communication for people everywhere, several civil society organizations around the world – WACC included – have been advocating for the recognition of communication as a basic human right. Specific issues have changed over the years: the New World Information and Communication Order debates of the 1980s focused on issues such as media control and "cultural imperialism", the World Summit on the Information Society processes of the early 2000s highlighted the imbalances of the information society, and the digital rights movement of today is sounding the alarm on issues such as privacy and "fake news". Yet, the key demand remains the same: media and communication technologies should enhance social communication and advance human rights instead of becoming tools for privileging the powerful.

> *One of the most powerful narratives about the Internet as an enabler of social communication and as a vehicle to freedom, equality, and solidarity is that of the Internet as global commons, a resource that belongs to the entire human family.*

The right to freedom of expression, enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights[4], is the starting point for taking a rights-based approach to communication and information. "It is regarded as a central pillar of democracy, protecting the right to call our rulers to account, vital to preventing censorship, an indispensable condition of effective and free media." [5]

How power is exercised in society both enables and limits access to information and communication, which may in some cases undermine freedom of expression. For example:

> *A poor person seeking to highlight injustice in their lives and a powerful media mogul each have, before the law, precisely the same protection for their right to freely express their views. In practice, however, the former lacks a means to have her/his voice heard, while the latter can powerfully amplify her/his message and ensure it is widely heard.[6]*

The right to freedom of expression is best guaranteed when promoted *alongside* other rights. This is crucial today, as communication environments become more complex due to rapid technological change, different levels of access to platforms, multi-layered and transnational media governance processes, growing dependence on digital technology, and the emergence of media as a key space to advance inclusion and social change.[7]

Other rights that help "construct the environment in which freedom of expression may be fully consummated" include a right to participate in one's own culture and language, to enjoy the benefits of science, to information, to education, to participation in governance, to privacy, to peaceful assembly, to the protection of one's reputation"[8] all of which are part of the International Bill of Rights.[9] Other crucial elements include diversity of media content and ownership, press freedom, diverse and independent media, and democratic access to media[10]. WACC has produced free resources on a rights-based approach to communication, including a No-Nonsense Guide to Communication Rights[11].

Photo Credit: ACT Alliance

The great enabler

The Internet has the potential to be the greatest enabler of social communication in history. One of the core features of its technological design, the fact that "data packets can take different paths through the network, avoiding traditional barriers and control mechanisms"[12], means that those with Internet access can use the network to disseminate and access information in ways that were unimaginable even 30 years ago. The rise of services using VoIP, which enables voice communication using Internet protocols; IPTV, which enables online streaming[13]; and social media platforms, has transformed the ways in which people communicate. The impact of that transformation is best exemplified by the major role that Internet-based communications played in helping citizens organize quickly and effectively during the Arab Spring in 2010 and 2011[14].

Beyond changing the ways interpersonal and social communication occur, the rise of the Internet as the dominant communication and information technology has had profound implications throughout society. One need only looks at the ways in which Internet-based services such as Amazon (the leading global e-commerce platform), Google (a global advertising behemoth), Spotify (a leading audio streaming platform), Tinder (a popular dating app) and WeChat (the world's largest social media platform) have transformed entire industries and have forced us to change the way we think about trade, security, democracy, human rights, social cohesion, and economic development.

From its beginnings as a government project in the late 1960's/ early 1970s, the notion of a communication and information system whose technical characteristics emphasized openness and decentralization have been some the core principles that guided the development of the Internet. This led to the emergence of concepts such as net neutrality[15] and the Internet as a public good[16].

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Betrayed promises

However, as we head into the third decade of the 21st Century, it looks like the Internet has failed to deliver on its promise of transforming social communication for the better. The Internet has made it easier for people to connect and share information, and has provided us with new tools to strengthen the public sphere. But a number of challenges undermine its ability to advance freedom, equality, and solidarity. State and private sector are weakening this vision, and have succeeded in positioning themselves as *the* key actors dominating the Internet. Civil society has also failed to act decisively. These challenges include:

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- **Unrelenting digital divides:** states are not doing enough to bring access to the 3.5 to 4 billion people around the world that still lack access to the Internet[17]. This gap is likely to widen as richer countries transition to 5G networks capable of delivering services that developing countries on older infrastructure will not benefit from.

- **Human rights violations facilitated by Internet services**: Despite UN recognition that all human rights that exist offline also apply online[18], many states routinely violate human rights online by engaging in illegal surveillance, filtering, and blocking of content.
Private sector actors continue to produce software that facilitates these abuses[19].

- **Digital Illiteracy:** Not knowing how to use digital resources and to determine the veracity and reliability of online information continue to impede the inclusion and participation of millions of people around the world, especially those from marginalized communities or from rural areas in developing countries[xx].

- **Weaker media organizations**: Many established media organizations, both local and national, have been weakened and have lost their ability to practice investigative journalism because of the digital revolution. A key element of this equation is the global advertising market, which has shifted from media companies to Internet companies such as Google and Facebook. Together, they have a market share of 63%, roughly USD $61.6 billion per year. Global newspaper advertising revenue is expected to decline by USD$23.8 billion a year by 2021.[20] A diminished supply of reliable news media   contributes to the "'misinformation' society." (Oghia, 2018)[21].

- **Proliferation of online misinformation and disinformation**: Over the past five years, misinformation and disinformation campaigns (aka fake news) have become the norm. From the Philippines to the United States to Brazil, online disinformation has been blamed for undermining trust in public institutions, ushering in the age of national populism , and eroding freedom of expression[22].

- **Privacy at risk:** The business model of many Internet companies, which monetizes data collected through the provision of online services, has not only resulted in notorious privacy breaches[23], but has also given way to "surveillance capitalism."[24]

- **Enabled the rise of the "precariat"**: Internet-based platforms have facilitated the rise of a new economic class referred to as the *precariat*, made up primarily of young people from marginalized communities who rely on a "gig economy" defined by non-existent labour protections and economic instability.

- **Pointless "disruption"**: The rise of Internet-based platforms such as Airbnb and Uber upended the hotel and taxi industries, often in ways in that led to the rise of precarious employment and the loss of tax revenue for local and municipal governments.

- **Linguistic imperialism online.** Approximately 30% of all online content is in English, despite the fact that only about 360 million people of the 27.5 billion people in the world are native English speakers[25]. While the availability of content in different languages is increasing, millions of people speaking "less international" languages are effectively excluded from the Internet.

- **Undemocratic and privatized ownership of Internet resources.** The majority of Internet resources, from the backbone infrastructure to the web-based services we use everyday, is in the hands of private sector actors, even if government plays different regulatory roles. This may make sense since private capital finances telecommunications infrastructure[26], but it does mean that the public has limited control over most of critical Internet resources despite them being central to the functioning of society[27].

Civil Society: Connecting the dots

Photo Credit: Shutterstock

One of the failures of international civil society over the past 20 years has been our inability to convey the importance of communication and information-related issues to the public. This may be the result of the assumption, especially among many people in developed countries, that communication is a non-issue, especially in the age of Twitter, e-mail, and cloud computing. We have not articulated a vision of communication and information resources as *common* resources that belong to all of us, much like water and clean air., We have not   effectively argued the ways in which a communication and information order driven by private gain and opaque governance undermines not just our ability to communicate, but also almost all aspects of our lives. Some civil society actors have proposed frameworks for the democratization of today's Internet-based communication ecosystem -- The Association for Progressive Communication's Feminist Principles of the Internet[28] and Internet Rights

Charter[29], the JustNet Coalition's Delhi Principles[30], and the work of the Internet Social Forum[31] are excellent examples. But these efforts have failed to gain broader support in multi-stakeholder Internet governance circles.

This failure is, of course, not just the result of our shortcomings. The high degree of complexity involved in Internet-related discussions, both from a governance and a technical perspective, which discourages greater public involvement, and the lack of sustainable funding and political will on the part of powerful actors are additional factors

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All in all, our efforts have failed to generate momentum around the notion that unless we position human rights, democratic governance, and social justice as *the* main frameworks to govern digital and Internet-based communication, the vision of an internet as an enabler of transformative social change will be overshadowed by a for-profit and commercial logic of communication.

WACC is currently launching a global process to build a broader coalition to advocate for a communication and information ecosystem that truly upholds freedom, equality, and solidarity. We hope you will join us.

This No-Nonsense Guide *was compiled from a number of sources by Lorenzo Vargas, with input from Philip Lee, Sara Speicher, and Tess Sison, and is published by the World Association for Christian Communication*
(WACC).

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[1] http://cdn.agilitycms.com/wacc-global/Images/Galleries/RESOURCES/e-pubs/No-nonsense-guides/PDFS/10communication_rights.5.pdf

[2] A media and communication ecosystem to refers to the multiple mechanisms through which information sharing and interpersonal communication unfold in a given society. For example, in a modern society like Canada, where the author lives, the media and communication ecosystem includes things such as public broadcasting, privately owned media outlets, and Internet services such as e-mail and social media, as well as the many laws and policies related to freedom of expression, press freedom, privacy, telecommunications, and cybersecurity, among other elements.

[3] Traber, Michael. "Communication is inscribed in human nature" in *idoc internazionale*, Vol. 30, Nos. 1 & 2, January-June 1999. Rome: IDOC.

[4] United Nations. 1948. Universal Declaration of Human Rights. *Article 19: Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes the freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.* http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/

[5] CRIS Campaign. 2005. *Assessing Communication Rights: a Handbook*. Communication Rights in the Information Society Campaign. Pg.22. http://cdn.agilitycms.com/wacc-global/Images/Galleries/RESOURCES/COMMUNICATION-RIGHTS/Assessing-Communication-Rights.pdf

[6] Ibid.

[7] Couldry, Nick and Clemencia Rodriguez (2015). "Chapter 13- Media and Communications". *Rethinking Society for the 21st Century: Report of the International Panel on Social Progress.* https://www.ipsp.org/

[8] CRIS Campaign. 2005. Pg.23

[9] The International Bill of Human Rights (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/Compilation1.1en.pdf

[10] CRIS Campaign. 2005. Pg.21-24.

[11] Lee, Philip, Anna Turley, and Pradip Thomas. 2010. *The No-Nonsense Guide to Communication Rights.* World Association for Christian Communication (WACC). http://cdn.agilitycms.com/wacc-global/Images/Galleries/RESOURCES/COMMUNICATION-RIGHTS/No-nonsense-guide-to-Communication-Rights.pdf

[12] Krubalija, Jovan (2016). An Introduction to Internet Governance. Diplo Foundation: Geneva. Pg 7. https://www.diplomacy.edu/sites/default/files/AnIntroductiontoIG_7th%20edition.pdf

[13] Ibid.

[14] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zJSSEAMSKWw

[15] http://www.theopeninter.net/

[16] https://qz.com/293904/barack-obama-says-the-internet-is-a-public-good-and-thats-why-the-us-needs-net-neutrality/

[17] https://wearesocial.com/us/blog/2018/01/global-digital-report-2018

[18] https://ap.ohchr.org/documents/E/HRC/d_res_dec/A_HRC_20_L13.doc

[19] https://citizenlab.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Final-UNSRVAG-CitizenLab.pdf

[20] Oghia, Michael J. *Governing Digital Convergence: An Issue Paper on Media Development and Internet Governance.* Global Forum for Media Development. https://gfmd.info/internet-governance/

[21] Ibid.

[22] https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/jul/27/fake-news-inquiry-data-misuse-deomcracy-at-risk-mps-conclude

[23] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q91nvbJSmS4

[24] https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/jan/20/shoshana-zuboff-age-of-surveillance-capitalism-google-facebook

[25] http://labs.theguardian.com/digital-language-divide/

[26] https://www.zdnet.com/article/report-cloud-companies-are-paying-for-a-growing-share-of-internet-infrastructure/

[27] https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2014/01/so-who-owns-the-internet/

[28] https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/feminist-principles-internet-version-20

[29] https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/about-apc/apc-internet-rights-charter

[30] https://justnetcoalition.org/delhi-declaration

[31] http://internetsocialforum.net/isf/?page_id=1402

The World Association for Christian Communication is an international organization that promotes communication as a basic human right, essential to people's dignity and community.

WACC is responsable for the Centre for Communication Rights portal
— a source of documents and materials about all aspects of communication rights.

WACC is a member of