

EDITORIAL

A quarter of a century ago, in an essay published in the journal *Religion and Society*, Michael Traber wrote:

“Communication, both public and private, is a fundamental human right and, as such, the precondition for other human rights, because communication is intimately bound up with what it means to be human. The freedom to speak and to publicize, and to create works of communication (cultural goods), is not only an essential component of human dignity and cultural identity, but it is also necessary for any progress in other rights.”¹

That statement followed a long-running debate in the 1970s and 1980s about a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO), which in turn laid the groundwork for the [MacBride Report](#) (published by UNESCO), the [Cultural Environment Movement](#) (inspired by George Gerbner), the [People’s Communication Charter](#) (guided by Cees J. Hamelink), the Communication Rights in the Information Society (CRIS) Campaign (launched by the [Platform for Communication Rights](#), an umbrella group of international NGOs active in media and communication) and culminating in the ITU-led [World Summit on the Information Society](#) (Geneva 2003 and Tunis 2005).

What became known as the “right to communicate” or “communication rights” is now the subject of a considerable body of scholarly literature. Much of its history and evolution is explored in the book *The Right to Communicate*² and can be found on the WACC portal called [Centre for Communication Rights](#).

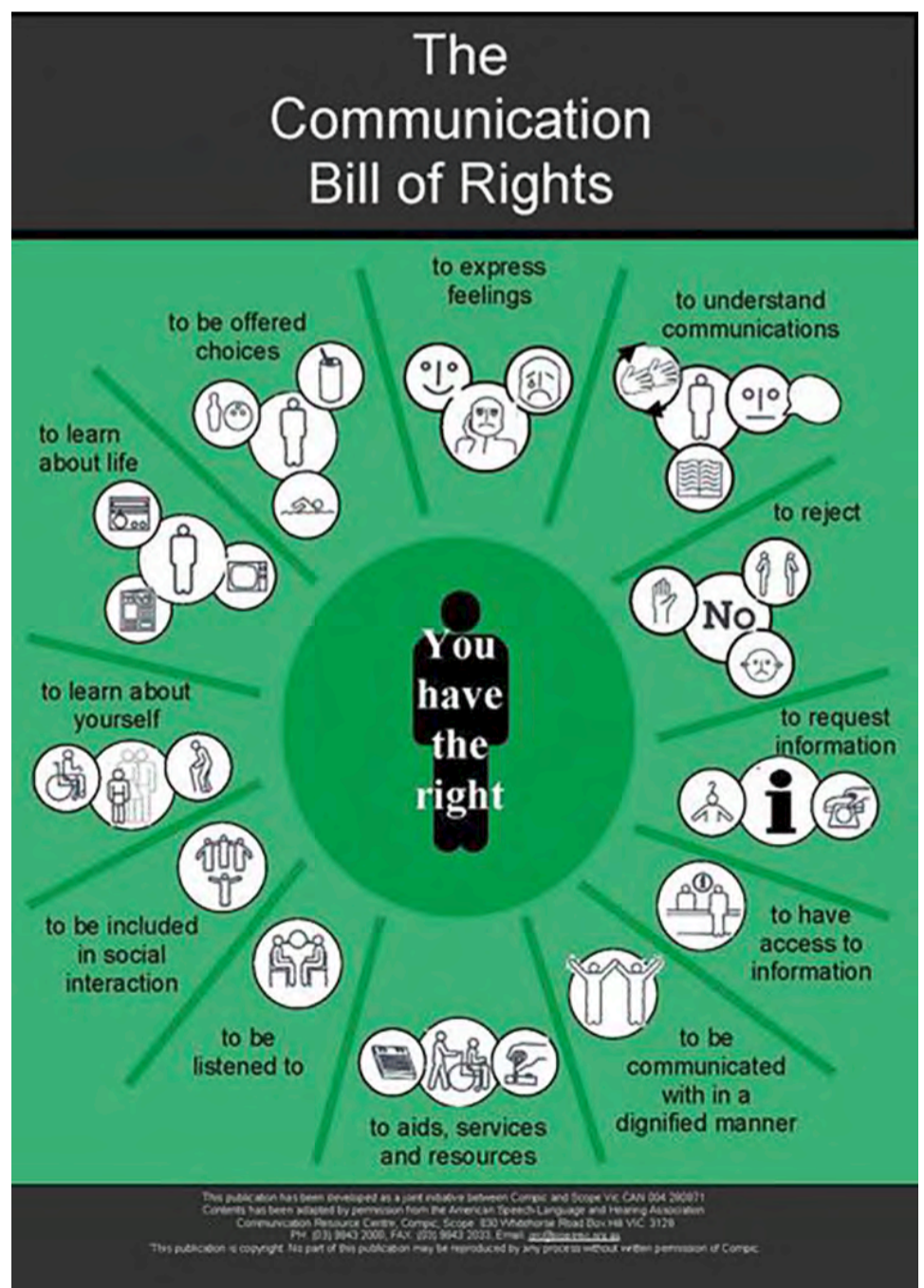
Taking a rights-based approach to communication means that it becomes a legal entitlement, rather than a commodity or service provided on a commercial or charitable basis. For example, to date freedom

of information laws have been implemented in over 95 countries in relation to the public sector, although most exclude the private sector from their jurisdiction. The right to information falls within the framework of communication rights

A rights-based approach also means that achieving basic and improved levels of access to communication should be a priority; that the “least served” should be better targeted and therefore inequalities reduced; that communities and vulnerable groups will be empowered to take part in decision-making processes; and that the means and mechanisms available in the UN human rights system will be used to monitor progress in realizing communication rights and in holding governments accountable.

Ten years after the World Summit on the Information Society in Tunis, the General

Poster campaign by the Autism Society NWT Canada (2014).



Assembly High-level Meeting to review the implementation of its outcomes took place 15-16 December 2015 at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. It was an opportunity for in-depth discussions around progress, gaps, and challenges, as well as areas for future action.

The UN General Assembly's [Overall Review of the Implementation of WSIS Outcomes](#), prepared in time for the meeting, recognized that "human rights have been central to the WSIS vision, and that ICTs have shown their potential to strengthen the exercise of human rights, enabling access to information, freedom of expression, and freedom of assembly and association" (47).

Without mentioning communication rights by name, the document also emphasized that "communication is a fundamental social process, a basic human need, and the foundation of all social organization, and is central to the Information Society. Everyone, everywhere should have the opportunity to participate, and no one should be excluded from the benefits the Information Society offers" (50).

The WSIS+10 Review stressed the link between communication and building "a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society, where everyone can create, access, utilize and share information and knowledge, enabling individuals, communities and peoples to achieve their full potential in promoting their sustainable development and improving their quality of life" (6).

Despite that long awaited recognition, the communication rights movement itself has been criticized for a failure to demonstrate how sustainable development and the eradication of poverty can be enhanced, facilitated, or advanced through the implementation of communication rights. In *Negotiating Communication Rights: Case Studies from India* (Sage, 2011), Pradip Thomas, a stalwart of the right to communicate, notes:

"There is a need for the CR movement to ground itself in the local and begin from where people are. Vital to the survival of already enfeebled communities is their ability

to have faith in their own meanings, and the ability to articulate the key deficits including communication they face. ... A philosophy of communication rights offers a conceptual framework to understand the practice of communication rights. It offers a framework for us to understand the 'why' and 'what' of communication rights" (p. 47).

This issue of *Media Development* is an attempt to demonstrate how communication rights in practice have advanced the cause of social justice in particular circumstances and at particular times. As Seán Ó Siochrú, one of the leading lights of the CRIS Campaign, notes in his article, the right to communicate:

"goes beyond ensuring that those currently excluded from the public domain can have their voices amplified – welcome and all as this would be. The right to communicate is, in the end, not just about being heard: it must also mean securing access to the information you need; and being listened to by those in power with due consideration for your views."

You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink. There are those who do not wish to listen to or give consideration to other people's views. While communication rights propose an environment in which people's voices can be heard, it is up to civil society in alliances and partnerships to call for, campaign for, and bring about real social change.

In turn, civil society needs the determined support and encouragement of enlightened governmental and non-governmental organizations, corporate entities that have the interests of others at heart, and faith-based organizations that want sustainable development goals to become reality. ■

Notes

1. Michael Traber (1992). "Communication as a Human Need and Human Right." In *Communicating Peace: Entertaining Angels Unawares*, edited by Philip Lee. Penang: Southbound (2008).
2. *The Right to Communicate: Historical Hopes, Global Debates, and Future Premises*, edited by Aliaa Dakroury, Mahmoud Eid, and Yahya R. Kamalipour. Dubuque: Kendall Hunt (2009).