



# Join the World Association for Christian Communication!

WACC is an international organization that promotes communication as a basic human right, essential to people's dignity and community. Rooted in Christian faith, WACC works with all those denied the right to communicate because of status, identity, or gender. It advocates full access to information and communication, and promotes open and diverse media. WACC strengthens networks of communicators to advance peace, understanding and justice.

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Full details can be found on WACC's web site:  
[www.waccglobal.org](http://www.waccglobal.org)

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- 4 **Editorial**
- 5 **Why WACC?**  
*Philip Lee, Sarah Macharia and Lorenzo Vargas*
- 10 **Sanctuaries for deep dialogue and togetherness**  
*Cees J. Hamelink*
- 13 **Affirming humanity: the challenge for communicators**  
*Rachel Viney*
- 15 **Putting virtue into the virtual: Ethics in the infosphere**  
*Jim McDonnell*
- 19 **Challenges for communication rights in the 21st century**  
*Ellen Ueberschär*
- 25 **The new normal**  
*Dennis A. Smith*
- 28 **Musings about WACC**  
*Pradip N. Thomas*
- 31 **Communication makes relationship possible**  
*Carlos A. Valle*

- 33 **What is Christian communication in the face of widespread exposure of abusive Christianity?**  
*Peter Horsfield*
- 37 **On the screen**

## In the Next Issue

The 4/2018 issue of *Media Development* will explore today's world of digital communications and their impact on societies everywhere.

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“What the churches say about communication is not half as important as what they do,” wrote Michael Traber in the editorial of the 1/1984 issue of WACC’s journal *Media Development*. Its theme was “Church Statements on Communication” and it included “Communicating Credibly” – the declaration of the 1983 Vancouver Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC).

As Traber concluded, “Looking at the World Council of Churches’ statement and other documents on communication, one gets the impression that the churches have at long last made a start on an adventurous journey through the varied and fast changing landscape of the world of communication.”

In some ways, much the same could have been said of the secular world of communications. In 1980, UNESCO published the MacBride Report, its international study of communication problems optimistically subtitled “Towards a new more just and more efficient world information and communication order”.

Seán MacBride, who chaired the commission that produced the report, noted in its preface, “As communication is so central to all social, economic and political activity at community, national and international levels, I would paraphrase H. G. Wells and say human history becomes more and more a race between communication and catastrophe.” Nearly 40 years later, that insight has lost none of its relevance.

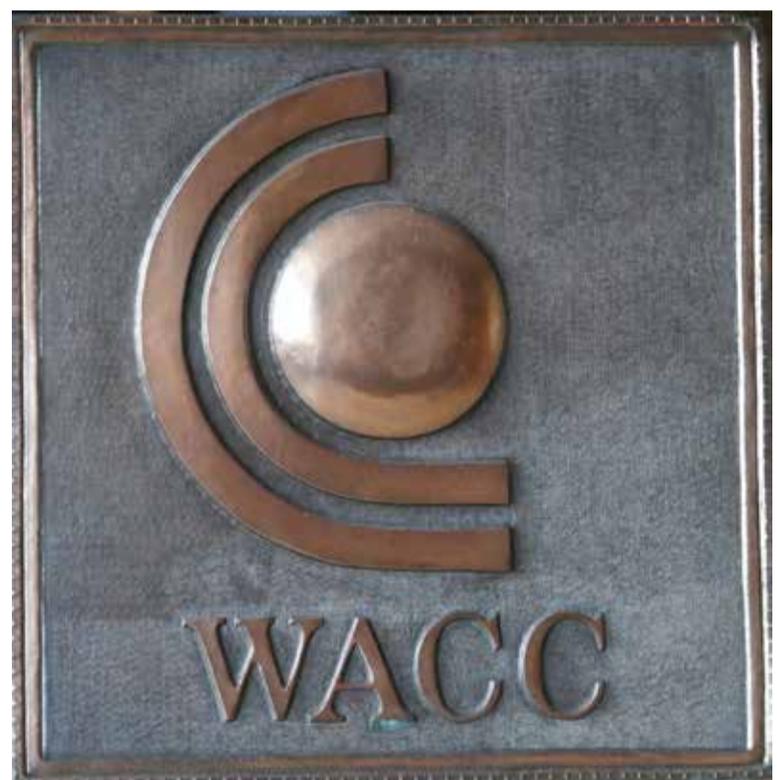
So what has WACC – an international non-governmental organization founded by faith-based entities in 1968 – to say about today’s world of communications? In essence, its problems and solutions stem from violations of human dignity and human rights. Questions of inclusion or exclusion, accessibility and affordability. More than that (as is excruciatingly relevant today), it is all about credibility and responsibility.

As the WCC’s Vancouver declaration underlined, “Many of us have become cynical about sources of information and there is a special urgency in our search for credibility.” Does the

communication affirm or exploit people? Does it make peace, build justice and promote wholeness? Does it respect the reality of pluralism and provide for the voicing of different views? Does it avoid quick judgements?<sup>1</sup>

Most communication researchers and practitioners today are familiar with the concept of communicative action put forward by sociologist Jürgen Habermas and the capability approach elaborated by economist Amartya Sen. Both stand on principles of a shared human dignity: a view of ordinary people being able to exercise practical choices in order “to achieve outcomes that they value and have reason to value.”<sup>2</sup>

But for people to be able to change and im-



*WACC’s old emblem - a monochromatic concept of communication wrapped around the globe - is reflected in its current multicoloured logo (see index page) and its remarkable slogan “Communication for All”.*

prove their lives, to claim rights and entitlements, their communication rights must be recognized and guaranteed. Communication rights are aptly described by Pradip N. Thomas as “a scaffolding for an engagement with key communication deficits and a framework for the exploration of solutions in different contexts around the world.”<sup>3</sup>

Is there moral equivalence between the worldviews of Habermas and Sen and WACC’s credo of “Communication for All”? Paulo Freire,

who argued that “If the structure does not permit dialogue, the structure must be changed”, would say yes:

“The radical, committed to human liberation, does not become the prisoner of a ‘circle of certainty’ within which reality is also imprisoned. On the contrary, the more radical the person is, the more fully he or she enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he or she can transform it. This individual is not afraid to confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled. This person is not afraid to meet the people or to enter into dialogue with them. This person does not consider himself or herself the proprietor of history or of all people, or the liberator of the oppressed; but he or she does commit himself or herself, within history, to fight at their side.”<sup>4</sup>

In recent years, public dialogue has turned towards the moral and spiritual imperative of ending poverty, towards dignity for migrants and refugees, towards a shared pilgrimage of justice and peace, and towards an international partnership on religion and sustainable development.

Whatever future direction such dialogue takes, in the year of its 50th anniversary WACC’s own “adventurous journey through the varied and fast changing landscape of the world of communication” is set to continue. ■

#### Notes

1. “Communicating credibly” – declaration of Vancouver assembly of WCC” in *Media Development* 1/1984, p.7.
2. Sen, Amartya (2001). *Development as freedom*, p. 291. Oxford University Press.
3. Pradip N. Thomas (2011). “A Brief History of Communication Rights” in *Negotiating Communication Rights: Case Studies from India*, p. 5. Sage Publications.
4. Paulo Freire (1970/1993). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p.39. 30th Anniversary Edition. Continuum.

## Why WACC?

**Philip Lee, Sarah Macharia and Lorenzo Vargas**

*Millions of people on every continent lack a voice to address inequality. They are underrepresented or misrepresented in the media, have low levels of media literacy, have limited access to relevant information and knowledge, and are excluded from participation in decision-making processes. WACC helps them to speak up.*

As a pioneer of the communication rights movement, since its foundation in 1968 WACC has been among the few global organizations working to advance the communication rights of marginalized communities around the world. Over the past 50 years, WACC has partnered with thousands of grassroots communities in their local contexts, while also advocating for systemic change in communication-related legislation and policy at the national, regional, and global levels.

When the economist and philosopher Amartya Sen was asked what was the most important thing that happened in the 20th century, he answered, “The rise of democracy”.<sup>1</sup> However, he went on to say, “We must not identify democracy with majority rule. Democracy has complex demands, which certainly include voting and respect for election results, but it also requires the protection of liberties and freedoms, respect for legal entitlements, and the guaranteeing of free discussion and uncensored distribution of news and fair comment.”

WACC is uniquely placed to promote the concept and practice of communication rights in order to help advance democracy and social justice. This is because WACC has extensive networks of partners in countries around the world, particularly at the grassroots level, and because WACC is widely recognized as an organization with an

unwavering commitment to supporting the rights of those who wish to make themselves heard.

WACC is needed because it takes a moral stance between those who have power and those who do not by raising questions of access to information and knowledge, and equitable and affordable access to communication platforms.

For WACC, taking a rights-based approach to communication means prioritizing improved levels of accessibility and affordability, so that the most marginalized and “least served” are empowered and inequalities reduced; it means enabling communities and vulnerable groups to participate in decision-making processes; and it means monitoring progress in realizing communication rights in order to hold governments and gatekeepers to account.

In this respect, the link between communication rights and sustainable development has never been clearer: traditional mass media, social media, and digital platforms can contribute to the creation of new public spaces for voices to challenge the social, economic and political structures that exclude people and communities.

### **Communication and sustainable development**

Over many years, the relationship between communication and development has taken several forms, although the notion of communication and information poverty has not always been at the centre of this exchange. Since the inception of international development as a global project in the 1950s, development practitioners and researchers have highlighted the potential of communication in supporting development processes.<sup>2</sup> This led to the emergence of varying practices within the field of communication for development, such as communication strategies for agricultural extension, technology transfer, behavioural change, and participatory communication.<sup>3</sup>

As a result, a plethora of names have emerged to describe the field, including communication for social change, development communication, development support communication, communication for development, participatory communication, media development, development media,

social communication, and behavioural change communication.<sup>4</sup>

Historically, two main approaches have shaped the role of communication in development. On the one hand, there are approaches based on an understanding of communication as a linear process of information transmission that causes social change in terms of knowledge, attitudes and behaviours and that are typically connected to a view of development as modernization. The transmission approach generally tended to overlook issues related to communication and information poverty.

On the other hand, there are approaches that view communication as a complex process linked to culture and connected to global and local economic, political, and ideological structures. These approaches are conceptually linked to views of development as empowerment and challenge relationships of dependence. They tend to understand communication and information as rights and to address key communication and information poverty issues.

Regional communication traditions have also shaped the field, with some regions of the world having a strong tradition in participatory dialogue-based communication and others having historically focused on media structures or on media content for development.

Today, there is growing consensus that communication-based development interventions should abide by principles such as inclusion, locally driven development, gender equality, community empowerment, participation, and respect for human rights. There is also increased recognition that all of the approaches to communication for development can contribute to processes of social change, depending on the local context, the issue at hand, and the appropriateness of tools used (mass media, community media, community dialogue, public art, etc.). In this sense, tackling communication and information poverty is increasingly at the centre of communication for development interventions.

The notion of communication as a cyclical or two-way process of exchange is also a defining feature of interventions that view communi-

cation as one of the building blocks of sustainable development. This understanding of communication reaffirms the notion that integrating communication and information issues into development is about more than simply providing people with information or access to communication technologies.

### **Communication and gender justice**

WACC believes that communication and information issues have to be part of all efforts to advance gender equality and sustainable development. This is because gender norms and roles inform the ways in which different groups in society are represented in the media, have access to media platforms to make their voices heard, have access to information and knowledge, as well as the possibilities open to them to own and control the tools of communication.

Gender inequalities around the world are also reflected in the rampant misrepresentation and underrepresentation of women in media content, the many cultural and structural barriers that prevent women from participating in decision-making, and the prevalence of sexism within media organizations. These issues help to perpetuate gender inequality in broader aspects of the lived cultural, social, political and economic experience.<sup>5</sup>

Four targets in particular under Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) highlight the relationship between communication and information poverty and gender equality. The first is Target 5.1 End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere. As WACC's own research has shown, women are under and misrepresented in media content, a form of discrimination that exacerbates, perpetuates, and normalizes other forms of discrimination against women and girls.

The second is Target 5.2 Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public sphere, including trafficking and other types of exploitation. Many women and girls around the world face violence when exercising their right to freedom of expression. This is particularly the case for women journalists, many of whom face

gender-based violence at work. Media portrayal of gender violence as normal or natural complicates efforts to end violence against girls and women.

The third is Target 5.5 Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life. The link to communication and information issues is self-evident as women need to have access to communication platforms and to relevant information in order to enjoy full and effective participation. Research by WACC's partners on gender and electoral news reveals patterns of rampant sexism against women candidates at the same time as male candidates are accorded greater and more serious attention. Such media treatment adds to the difficulties that women face in their efforts to participate in politics equally with men.

The fourth is Target 5.B Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women. One of the key manifestations of communication and information poverty is limited access to communication platforms and resources. An estimated 4.4 billion people – mostly poor, female, rural and living in developing countries – have no access to the Internet. According to the International Telecommunication Union, internet penetration rates are higher for men than for women in all regions of the world and the global Internet user gender gap grew from 11% in 2013 to 12% in 2016. A second key issue is rising cyber violence against women and girls, which discourages them from participating in online communities or working in jobs that require an online presence.

WACC fully supports Sustainable Development Goal 5, and it intends to work with government entities, international institutions, and civil society partners to:

- \* Gain greater recognition for the fact that gender inequality has a negative impact on the way people access communication and information, which in turn limits people's ability to improve their lives.
- \* Support initiatives to enable and enhance women's ability to participate in development

processes, including access to media platforms where they can raise concerns about issues that affect their lives. Promote and strengthen networks of media professionals working for gender equality.

- \* Integrate a gender perspective in communication training and media professional development courses.
- \* Develop and promote media tools for gender sensitive reporting.
- \* Encourage and recognize the work of women in public communication.
- \* Support media training of women to help enable their participation in the media sector as journalists, editors, and managers.
- \* Strengthen media owned by women.
- \* Promote freedom of expression for women, minority and marginalized groups.
- \* Increase the visibility of women from minority and marginalized groups, rural women, women with disabilities, migrants, refugees, displaced women in the media
- \* Increase the participation of women, minority and marginalized groups in content production.
- \* Eliminate gender stereotypes and hate speech from public media, including content that normalizes violence against girls and women.
- \* Expand and strengthen gender-specific media research and documentation.
- \* Promote the adoption and implementation of gender policies, ethics codes and guidelines at media house, industry and national levels, as relevant.

### **A rights-based view of communication**

WACC and its partners are convinced that addressing communication and information poverty through development interventions needs to be done from a rights-based perspective. This is because, in addition to drawing on existing and widely accepted rights frameworks, a rights-based approach gives development practitioners a common lens through which to understand and address communication and information issues.

The right to freedom of expression, enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration

of Human Rights,<sup>6</sup> is the starting point for taking a rights-based approach to communication and information. “[The UDHR] 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”.<sup>7</sup>

However, power among people in any given 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.”<sup>8</sup>

## Recent issues of *Media Development*

2/2018 Journalism that serves the public interest

1/2018 Gender and Media  
– A holistic agenda

4/2017 Digital Media and Social Memory

3/2017 Changing Media, Changing Perceptions

2/2017 Reforming the World

1/2017 Digital Futures

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For more information visit the WACC web site.

WACC believes that the right to freedom of expression is best guaranteed when promoted alongside a number of other rights. This is particularly important in today's context, when communication ecosystems are increasingly complex due to rapid technological change, different levels of access to platforms, multi-layered and often transnational media governance processes, growing dependence on digital technology, and the emergence of media as a key space to advance inclusion and social change.

Other rights that help build and maintain this kind of environment 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” all of which are part of the International Bill of Rights.<sup>9</sup> Other crucial elements include diversity of media content and ownership, press freedom, diverse and independent media, and democratic access to media.<sup>10</sup>

And last, but certainly not least in today's digital age, there are vital questions to address around the need for strong legal standards for data protection and data security; privacy; and reliable and affordable connectivity via global net neutrality. In addition, the development of artificial intelligence (AI) raises what accessnow describes as “some of the most challenging issues of the 21st century for human rights, ethics, accountability, transparency, and innovation.”

### WACC's future

The world of communication has changed, is changing, will continue to change – and much more quickly than we can understand and absorb those changes. The medium changes and the medium, as Marshall McLuhan pointed out, affects our perception of the message and the messenger. Yet WACC's message remains constant. What is that message?

It has to do with portraying and recognizing the intrinsic dignity and worth of all human beings no matter their background and belief.

It has to do with listening to marginalized

voices on a basis of equality. It has to do with placing oneself in the shoes of the other person or, if they have no shoes, walking barefoot alongside them.

Above all, it has to do with communication rights.

Here is what WACC says in “Communication for All: Sharing WACC's Principles”:

“Communication rights claim spaces and resources in the public sphere for everyone to be able to engage in transparent, informed and democratic debate. They claim unfettered access to the information and knowledge essential to democracy, empowerment, responsible citizenship and mutual accountability. They claim political, social and cultural environments that encourage the free exchange of a diversity of creative ideas, knowledge and cultural products. Finally, communication rights insist on the need to ensure a diversity of cultural identities that together enhance and enrich the common good.”

It's not a bad definition! ■

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5. See WhoMakestheNews and the Global Media Monitoring Project.
6. 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.
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8. 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/>

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).
10. CRIS Campaign. 2005. *Assessing Communication Rights: a Handbook. Communication Rights in the Information Society Campaign*, pp. 21-24.

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Lorenzo Vargas is a communication for development specialist and researcher on citizens' media. Lorenzo coordinates WACC's Communication for Social Change programme, which supports community media and citizen journalism initiatives in Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, the Pacific, and Africa. He is also a member of the ACT Alliance's Development Policy and Practice Advisory Group. Lorenzo holds a Hons. BA in Development Studies from York University, an MA in Communication from McGill University. Prior to joining WACC, Lorenzo worked with the Mosaic Institute as a programme manager and strategic communication advisor.

Philip Lee is WACC General Secretary and Editor of its international journal *Media Development*. His publications include *The Democratization of Communication* (ed.) (1995), *Requiem: Here's Another Fine Mass You've Gotten Me Into* (2001); *Many Voices, One Vision: The Right to Communicate in Practice* (ed.) (2004); *Communicating Peace: Entertaining Angels Unawares* (ed.) (2008); *Global and Local Televangelism* (ed. with Pradip N. Thomas) (2012) and *Public Memory, Public Media, and the Politics of Justice* (ed. with Pradip N. Thomas) (2012). In 2013, he was conferred Doctor of Divinity (Honoris Causa) by the Academy of Ecumenical Indian Theology and Church Administration in Chennai, India.

# Sanctuaries for deep dialogue and togetherness

Cees J. Hamelink

*We live on a fractured planet and we are the most fragmented species on the planet. We face fractures between generations, men and women, rich and poor, winners and losers, between those whose God is a God of fear and violence and those whose God is a God of love and care.*

These fractures kill people, marginalize ever-larger numbers of people, tear the social fabric of many communities apart and ruthlessly destroy our fellow inhabitants, the non-human animals that vanish from the planet at an alarming rate. Without wanting to sound too apocalyptic: the accumulation of these substantial fractures may culminate in the disappearance of the human species.

Our actions are determined by our ways of thinking and therefore actions that threaten the future of the planet are inspired by certain modes of thought. In most discussions and negotiations, these remain hidden. We may talk about what we do but usually not about what we think. We may reach superficial public agreement and may create a common comfortable discourse but leave out what we really should say. What we really desire, hope for, expect or fear is often left unsaid. We will only act differently when we think differently.

A most intractable problem that we need to solve is the challenge of "thinking together" (Isaacs, 1999) rather than thinking as separate atoms. This is a tough problem since we are biologically, psychologically, and linguistically wired to think in fragments. We understand the notion of "parts" better than the concept of "wholeness" because we think in fragments and not in coherent patterns. Once we have fractured the world into isolated pieces it is an illusion to think that simply con-



*Community dialogue circles use story telling and artwork to help groups feel safe sharing painful experiences. Photo: Somali Youth & Development Network.*

necting through advanced technologies will create togetherness. Although social media may connect us globally, they do not create togetherness.

In short, we need to communicate in togetherness in order to find how to live together in a deeply fractured world.

There are different approaches possible to cope with fractures. We can try to heal them but should be aware that not all fractures can be healed. Some may touch on longstanding, deeply felt and existentially meaningful positions that cannot be harmonized. We can try to be indifferent to fractures and make an effort to ignore them. Indifference may have the positive effect of living with deep differences without feeling threatened or feeling resentful of the other – but just living in separate universes.

We can also try to cope with fractures through recognizing them, accepting their persistence, and not making attempts at concessions or compromises, but seeking moments of togetherness: communicative moments in which we interact with different others through “deep dialogue”.

### **Deep dialogue**

Deep dialogue is the basis of “communicating together”. In the common way of conversation we hear only the words that fit our own conceptions. In many conversations, participants take positions that are no longer negotiable because they hold their assumptions to be truths and defend them even against overwhelming evidence of their ab-

surdity. Caught up in our own prejudices, fears and feelings we often listen to ourselves and not to others. We often accuse the other of not listening and being prejudiced and prefer not to see those flaws in our own thinking. We seldom ask real questions and more often than not produce opinionated statements to which we add a question mark.

The basic requirements for deep dialogue are trust, proximity, patience, mutuality and freedom:

- \* Trust means that in conversation I need to know that what the other says is genuine and the other should be assured that what I say is authentic. Against this demand of trust, our daily communicative practice is infected by massive flows of propagandistic messages, fake news and the powerful suggestion that we now live in the “post-truth” era.
- \* Proximity means that deep dialogue needs the whole body. Against this our common communicative practice is “disembodied”. We miss the body language of those we converse with in our mediated exchanges and hear only their – often mechanically recorded – voices and see their Skyped faces.
- \* Patience means taking time for reflection. Deep dialogue is slow and needs time for ideas to sink in and to understand perspectives different from our own. In our communicative practice, however, we tend to seek instant gratification as we are obsessed by short texts and frequent updates. We are anxious to miss something and to be “out of the loop”.
- \* Mutuality means reciprocity and cooperation. Against this, our communicative behaviour is often autistic as it focuses on “selfies” and self-glorifying Facebook pages. The competitive spirit that prevails in most societies defeats the purpose of deep dialogue since it renders conversational arenas places to win and to score.

\* Freedom means that people should be free to accept or reject each other's claims on the basis of reasons they can evaluate. Respect for the communicative freedom of others is a basic recognition of their human agency. Against this a formidable obstacle is our tribal instinct that makes it very difficult to accept the other as fundamentally different from us and see their alterity as a unique feature that cannot be assimilated and reduced to similarity. Communicative freedom also means the challenge to say "I do not know". Communicative freedom implies that we feel free to speak up. This means that we have to overcome an almost natural inclination to self-censorship that makes us not say things we want to say because we are afraid of the consequences.

### Sanctuaries

Deep dialogue requires what Gordon Burghardt calls "a relaxed field". From the study of animal play we learn that animals only play when they are relaxed and do not feel threatened by external forces. Having a deep dialogue is a form of playing and playing is an essential ingredient of human life. As Bellah beautifully formulates it, "time out of time.....is perhaps primordially characteristic of play". The "extinction of time" happens in a relaxed playing field. (Bellah, 569). Relaxed playing fields are the sanctuaries where humans achieve "temporarily [the transformative power of community]" (Bellah, 569.).

We should find them in our universities, schools and religious institutions. However, the realities of modern (neo-liberal, capitalist, individualist) societies and their unequal and hierarchical relations militate against the creation of relaxed fields.

The core mission of the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) in the coming years, therefore, will have to be – against all the odds – searching for, creating, and maintaining those sanctuaries where humanity can experience the ultimate play of deep dialogue.

### Desperate optimism

To engage in authentic conversation and achieve togetherness in communication is a tall order in-

deed, since the obstacles are very real and intimidating. Yet I believe that we have no other option than to be optimistic. For me this is a "desperate optimism". There is much reason to despair: such as the anger of Mother Gaia, the nuclear option, or the rapidly increasing global inequalities. Nevertheless, as Chomsky says in a recent interview, "if we despair we make things only worse!"

There are two strong arguments in favour of the position that we can achieve togetherness in communication. One argument is that most if not all the obstacles mentioned above are cultural constructs based upon ideas, beliefs, thoughts that are part of our cultural evolution. However resistant to change they may be, changes in the process of cultural evolution are real possibilities and can happen much more rapidly than transformations in our genetic evolution.

The second argument stems from the biological insight that the species homo learned early on that their communities would benefit from cooperative communication. Communication made the kind of coordination that hunting required possible and facilitated the organisation of complex societies. There is a good deal of evidence safely to suggest that the origin of human communication lies in the instinct to cooperate (Tomasello).

Through cooperative communication humans designed adequate adaptive systems that secured their survival and reproductive capacity. Human communication is based upon a cooperative infrastructure. The project of "communicating together" will be challenging and not always successful, but for desperate optimists there is no other way but engaging with it. ■

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# Affirming humanity: the challenge for communicators

Rachel Viney

*The other day, as part of the process of subscribing to an email list, a message appeared asking me to “affirm humanity”. Or at least that’s how I read it in the split second before realising that what it actually said was “confirm humanity”. Far from encouraging me to send positive vibes to my fellow women and men, it was prompting me to convince an automated newsletter platform that I am not a robot.*

There then followed a rather queasy interlude in which, no matter how hard I peered at a dingy photograph of a suburban streetscape, I couldn’t be sure I’d identified every single segment containing a traffic light. In such moments, there is always a flicker of existential doubt: might I in fact be a machine after all?

Being asked to prove one’s humanity by means of pixels rather than molecules is just one of the many paradoxes of communication in today’s world. And ever since I was invited to contribute to this 50th anniversary edition of *Media Development*, and to consider how communication can shape a better world, I’ve been pondering what I could meaningfully say given the enormity of the challenges that face each one of us who believe in communication as a force for good.

At one time, my response to WACC’s invitation might have included a restatement of the value of public service broadcasting (PSB) within the communications ecosystem. In the UK, PSB is represented not only by the licence-fee-funded BBC, but also by a number of commercially funded television channels. And, despite competition from providers such as YouTube or Netflix, PSB channels continue to account for a significant

proportion of UK television viewing: according to research by the communications regulator, Ofcom, in 2016 85% of individuals with a TV in their household watched a PSB channel in a typical week.

The purposes of PSB were recently summarised by Ofcom, as “informing our understanding of the world”, “stimulating knowledge and learning”, “reflecting UK cultural identity” and “representing diversity and alternative viewpoints”. Yet, admirable as those purposes are, and convinced as I am of the continuing importance of PSB and the ideals that underpin it, I have also come to believe that in today’s complex web of communications, PSB, while still relevant – necessary even – offers neither a panacea for nor a bulwark against the wider challenges we face.

My reasons for thinking this are not only because of a changed technological context – though it is undeniably the case that PSB was conceived in an age of spectrum scarcity, whereas our present time has been transformed by digital technology into an age of communications ubiquity – overload, some might say. There is, for me, also a philosophical issue at play here, which I might characterise as a growing disenchantment with the belief that there can exist “a body that is somehow removed from the corrupting loyalties and bruising skirmishes of everyday life and, therefore, able to provide a more impartial perspective” as Professor Des Freedman puts it in his carefully-argued article “Public service’ and the journalism crisis – is the BBC the answer?”.

Freedman has little sympathy for the arguments of right-wing critics of the BBC, but disputes that, “Far from retaining its independence from all vested interests and delivering a critical and robust public interest journalism, the BBC is a compromised version of a potentially noble ideal: far too implicated in and attached to existing elite networks of power to be able to offer an effective challenge to them.”

## **Protecting the communications ecosystem**

These days I find myself largely in agreement with Freedman’s analysis. But in a world of clickbait, trolls and “fake news”, I would want to go further

and contend that placing too much faith in any individual media organisation or outlet, no matter how publicly accountable, at some level involves us in delegating to others responsibility for protecting the overall communications ecosystem of which we are all a part.

To take an analogy from the physical world; there can be few people now unaware of the tide of plastic waste – an estimated 8 million tons of it every year, according to the UN Environment Programme – that is choking our oceans and damaging marine life with who-knows-what consequences. Vivid images of vast slicks of plastic, and distressing footage of deformed or dying sea creatures, have played a key part in alerting ordinary citizens the world over to the deadly consequences of our plastic habit and in galvanising a powerful grassroots response that has led to changes in behaviour at an individual and corporate level.

It's hard to think of a single image as arresting as, say, that of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch to illustrate the threat posed by the pollution of the ocean of communication – in which each of us swims every day – though it's not hard to identify ways in which public discourse has been sullied. An egregious example is the 45th President of the United States, who, while not hesitating to dub inconvenient stories “fake news”, makes an average of nearly 6.5 false or misleading claims every day, according to the Washington Post's Fact Checker database, which analyses, categorises and tracks his every suspect statement. By the beginning of



*The Great Pacific Garbage Patch is the largest accumulation of ocean plastic in the world and is located between Hawaii and California.*

May 2018 he had, according to the Post, made no fewer than 3,001 false or misleading claims.

There are, though, many smaller, less public examples – which, continuing the marine analogy, we might think of as the equivalent of microbeads – plastic particles so small they pass through water filtration systems, but which nonetheless pose a significant hazard to marine life. An example from very close to home is the letter I received from my bank informing me that it couldn't process a form I'd sent it because my signature “didn't match our records”. Fearing that someone had attempted to impersonate me, I immediately went to my nearest branch, some distance away, only to discover that because I'd opened the account online the bank had never actually had a record of my signature.

Experience has taught me that you can tell a lot about an organisation from the way it communicates. The bank's lack of care in giving me the full picture of what had happened left me wondering how reliable it might be in other areas. (As it turned out, my instincts were correct: not many weeks later the same bank hit the headlines when a major IT migration went spectacularly wrong, plunging many of its customers into serious financial difficulties and leading the chair of the parliamentary committee investigating the debacle to criticise the bank's “poor communications about the scale and nature of the problems it has faced”.)

Now, it could be argued that expecting too much from a financial institution in the way it uses language is bound to result in disappointment. But, speaking with people in my immediate circle about their experience of communication within different types of organisation, I was struck by how they too immediately started to tell stories of language being used to cloak and confuse rather

than to enlighten and explain.

One acquaintance, a long-time campaigner for an international NGO, told of asking in a public meeting how the organisation's activities in a particularly sensitive region were consistent with its policy for that area. After first asserting that no such policy existed, the organisation's representative subsequently changed tack to admit that it did, but then added "it depends what you mean by 'policy'."

### **Affirming humanity**

A factor shared by all meaningless, misleading or obscure communication is the failure to take full account of the human beings at the receiving end. Far from affirming humanity, such communication frequently seeks to deny or exploit it. And while it is undoubtedly the case that the digital revolution has opened up opportunities that previous generations could only dream of, it is also changing societies and individuals in ways we are only starting to understand, and with consequences of which we are still unaware.

The challenge this represents is vast, and can surely only increase as technology makes greater and greater inroads not only into the workplace but also into our homes and what was once private space. But I sense, too, a significant opportunity for WACC and other organisations that share a commitment to communication for all.

That opportunity is twofold: firstly, to encourage and promote a far-reaching dialogue about what it means in a digital age to practise communication that affirms humanity; and, secondly, to enable people both to identify and challenge communication that works against human values and to engage in communication that is rich, meaningful and life-affirming. ■

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# Putting virtue into the virtual: Ethics in the infosphere

**Jim McDonnell**

*The founder of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg faced legislators in Washington and Brussels recently to answer charges that it had failed to protect the personal data of 50 million users and allowed fake news and political manipulation to flourish.*

Watching Zuckerberg as he attempted to answer the pointed criticisms of his global social network/advertising platform, brought to mind another 'Z', the worker ant hero 'Z' (voiced by Woody Allen) in the animated film *Antz* (1998). In a famous scene, he reassures a fretful Princess Bala (Cameron Diaz) that he will rescue her mother. "Don't worry, I know almost exactly what I'm doing", he says. The princess looks unconvinced. Zuckerberg's interrogators did too.

If there was one inescapable conclusion that the watching audience could draw from the often meandering exchanges, it was that elected officials certainly don't "know almost exactly" what they are doing. They, like the rest of us, are finding it hard to understand and adjust to the seismic shift that is occurring in the configuration of our daily lives. Even Zuckerberg, despite his pivotal position in the social media universe, looked just as unprepared to grapple with the speed of change and the complexity of the realignments that are taking place as the rest of us.

We are moving rapidly and irreversibly into a new world and in the midst of that transition it is hard to discern how best to respond. The worlds of big data and communications are not just converging but have already merged; artificial intelligence (AI) has long left the realms of science fiction. Luciano Floridi, Professor of Philosophy and Ethics of Information and Director of the Digital

Ethics Lab at the University of Oxford, contends that “we no longer live online or offline but onlife, that is, we increasingly live in that special space, or infosphere, that is seamlessly analogue and digital, offline and online.” That is to say, the often-made distinction between virtual reality and real life is no longer relevant, if it ever was.

As we struggle to keep our bearings in the midst of the technological whirlwind, Floridi suggests that we need to focus our attention, on a “fundamental question, which is socio-political and truly crucial: what kind of mature information societies do we want to build? What is our human project for the digital age?”<sup>1</sup>

### **The power of technology**

This is not a new question. However, in recent years it receded into the background as consumers, politicians, bankers and the media became blinded by the power of technological behemoths like Apple, Google, Facebook and Amazon. Now, the glamour of social media and the digital future has become tarnished by disputes about tax, fake news and data harvesting scandals.

Though these events evoked outrage and complaints of ethical malpractice, most of the response has been about trying to find governance, regulatory and technical fixes. Much less attention is given to examining the underlying ethical assumptions that shape how these companies operate as they help build the information society.

Floridi, in his discussion of digital ethics, sets out clearly why discussion of ethics is so central to the task of building a humane info-society. As he says:

“Digital ethics, with its values, principles, choices, recommendations and constraints already influences the world of technology much more than any other force. This is because the evaluation of what is morally good, right or necessary shapes public opinion – hence the socially acceptable or preferable and the politically feasible, and so, ultimately, the legally enforceable, and what agents may or may not do. In the long run, people (as users, consumers, citizens, patients,

etc.) are constrained in what they can or cannot do by organizations, e.g. businesses, which are constrained by law, but the latter is shaped and constrained by ethics, which is where people decide in what kind of society they want to live.”

This is why ethical reflection has to form a greater part in the discussions about regulation and self-regulation in the context of information and communication technologies. Take, for example, the recent upsurge in interest at the political level in Europe in the concept of self-regulation as applied both to social media companies and to social network users themselves. The pressure is on the likes of Facebook, Twitter and Google to police themselves and to remove content from their platforms that is deemed illegal or offensive. This is to some extent a way of passing on the costs of enforcement to the business themselves but also, challenges the underlying assumption that Facebook, for example, is a neutral platform.

However, treating a social media platform as a publisher has potentially serious implications for freedom of expression. Self-regulation in this instance raises many questions about accountability and transparency of decision-making and about who has editorial responsibility for what is published online. Such questions should not be set aside as the discussion focuses on technical feasibility or strict legal liability.

Regulation and self-regulation is a necessary but not a sufficient response. Social media providers themselves, advertisers and other commercial users and individuals have to commit to implement what has been agreed. But this commitment depends upon a broad based ethical consensus on what behaviour is acceptable. Managers and organizers of the self-regulated system have to show that they are adhering to an ethos that ensures they will carry out self-regulation on their side that is meaningful and ethical. Those who are taking decisions and managing within the digital media system have to put virtue into the virtual.

In short, the designers, managers and operators of systems need civic and ethical formation. In a recent interview Sean Parker, the founding President of Facebook, admitted that ethical con-

siderations took second place when the social media model was being designed:

“The thought process that went into building these applications, Facebook being the first of them, ... was all about: How do we consume as much of your time and conscious attention as possible? And that means that we need to sort of give you a little dopamine hit every once in a while, because someone liked or commented on a photo or a post or whatever. And that’s going to get you to contribute more content, and that’s going to get you ... more likes and comments.”

Parker also admitted that seeing the unintended consequences of this model today he has become “something of a conscientious objector” on social media.<sup>2</sup>

### **Media literacy**

Self regulation is also now often linked with the need for greater media literacy. The expansion of social media, fake news scandals, cyber bullying, online propaganda, radicalism and privacy and data protection issues have pushed media literacy up the political agenda. Much is made of the need for people to learn to claim their rights and exercise their responsibilities as digital citizens. As part of this process, media literacy is seen as a way for people to learn to self-regulate, using the acquired skills of critical awareness, knowledge and other capabilities.

Now some media educators are realising that these skills are not enough and that a value based ethical formation is also needed. An interesting study in the UK by the think tank Demos, entitled *The Moral Web*, considers the importance of “educating for character” and forming “digitally virtuous citizens” as part of education for good citizenship and the inculcation of civic virtues among adolescents. The aim, here, is for young people to learn how to act in a virtuous way online, to exercise their moral responsibilities. Demos claims that “digital citizenship is a promising approach to support healthy choices on social media.”<sup>3</sup>

For a long time reflection on ethics has been

rather in the background of discussions around the construction and operation of the infosphere. Always there behind the scenes, doing a great deal of unheralded work but not yet centre stage, not yet the focus of sustained attention. But there are signs that this is changing. In the last few days three media items which explicitly raised ethical questions caught my attention.

The most prominent was the report of the faked death of the Russian journalist, Arkady Babchenko, in Kiviv, Ukraine. In a dramatic way, the story has prompted serious questions about the moral responsibilities of journalists and the commitment to truthfulness in reporting. “The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) called Babchenko’s hoax murder “intolerable”. The IFJ president, Philippe Leruth complained, “By falsely spreading the news ... the Ukrainian authorities have gravely harmed the credibility of information”.<sup>4</sup>

The second story concerned Google’s partnership with the Pentagon to develop artificial intelligence for analysing drone footage. The affair has generated a petition signed by about 4,000 employees who demanded “a clear policy stating that neither Google nor its contractors will ever build warfare technology.” In response, it “promised employees that it would produce a set of principles to guide its choices in the ethical minefield of defence and intelligence contracting.”<sup>5</sup>

And the third incident was a letter in the *Financial Times* from the head of the UK’s Nuffield Foundation, a major funder of research in educational and social policy. Tim Gardam, a former senior media executive, wrote in response to an editorial calling for ethical reflection about the design and use of artificial intelligence and the common good. Gardam makes a strong plea that:

“Above all, we need to embed ethical thinking in the tech industry, as an inherent part of its culture. There are many in the sector who recognise the urgent need to establish common norms to translate ethical principles into practical decisions, as well as to explore the question of whether the underlying logic of any innova-

tion reflects the values we want in a future society.”<sup>6</sup>

One of the strengths of WACC is that in its commitment to the principles of communication WACC has developed an ethical values framework which gives a consistent underpinning to its actions and interventions. At the same time, it has both a strong presence in promoting communication rights at the grassroots and a history of advocating for communication rights in different forums.

So WACC is well placed to explore how the concepts of digital and information rights can mesh with communication rights in terms of governance, regulation, self-regulation and the drive for media (and information) literacy. It can, in its own field, help in many ways, as Gardam says, to translate ethical principles into practical decisions.

In particular, WACC can work with others to try and ensure that the poor and marginalised are not forgotten in the infosphere. What is happening to the people of the peripheries and their communities? Where in the information society will there be accessible places of encounter between all citizens? Who will be recognized as having the right and the opportunity to communicate in the infosphere? What about the communication rights of people with disabilities, with visual and sensorial impairments?

Through its capacity to bring together advocacy, grass roots implementation and ethical reflection – as it did in the world dominated by ana-

logue media – WACC can make its own unique contribution to placing core values, moral behaviour and ethical choices at the heart of public debate around the human future of the digital world.

In this endeavour it can help bring the vision and aspirations of the Civil Society Declaration issued after the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) 2003 closer to a lived reality:

“We are committed to building information and communication societies that are people-centred, inclusive and equitable. Societies in which everyone can freely create, access, utilise, share and disseminate information and knowledge, so that individuals, communities and peoples are empowered to improve their quality of life and to achieve their full potential.”<sup>7</sup> ■

#### Notes

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*A Rohingya woman, one of more than 600,000 Rohingya fled Myanmar towards the end of 2017, sits in the entrance to her shelter in the Kutupalong refugee camp in Bangladesh. Photo: ACT/Joel Carillet.*

# Challenges for communication rights in the 21st century

Ellen Ueberschär

*“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.”*

Heinrich Böll titled a speech delivered in Wuppertal, Germany, in 1959, “Language as a refuge of freedom”. Throughout his literary life, a 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 his 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. Illegally, I 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 honour 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 occasionally 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, were 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”.

WACC Europe 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 MacBride 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.

Just 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, although many of them were soon discontinued. Faith-based media were able to develop, and the time of grey 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 against and prevents precisely what MacBride said in his report and later, in 1982, in a lecture given at a WACC-related 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 MacBride defined communication as a human right: a radical idea whose actual implementation and enforcement – as I see it – has 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

*After several weeks of civil unrest, on 9 November 1989 the East German government announced that all GDR citizens could visit West Germany and West Berlin. In celebration, crowds of East Germans climbed onto the Wall, joined by West Germans on the other side.  
Photo: Quora.*

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 WACC's field of work and achievement 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 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

*A radio presenter in the cabin of the Lutheran radio station in La Paz, Bolivia. Community radio is an important element in WACC's strategy to strengthen the work of civil society organizations in efforts to advance the democratic participation and active citizenship of marginalized peoples and communities. (Photo: ACT/ Sean Hawkey).*

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.

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 one hour ago.

Secondly, our perspective has shifted from the national to the global. 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 are 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 with 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 bounds 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, fuelled 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, 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 are changing the structure of social public life. The media researcher Caja Thimm says: “Large platforms such as Facebook and Twitter in particular enable a worldwide exchange that supports completely distinct audi-

ences, 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 behaviour.

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 behaviour 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 50 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 catalogue 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.

### **Accountability, empathy and digital participation**

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 neighbouring 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 the target 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. Where-

ever the legal framework for freedom and diversity of opinion is lacking, digital participation also suffers.

Even worse, repressive states with their secret services as well as 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 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, and 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 sum, 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, whether 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! ■

*The above is the text of the keynote presentation “Where freedom is threatened, speech is threatened: Challenges for communication rights in the 21st century” given at a symposium celebrating WACC’s 50th anniversary held on 14 May 2018 in Hamburg, Germany.*

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Dr Ellen Ueberschär is President of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung. She was born in East Berlin in 1967. After the East German authorities banned her from studying medicine, she first completed job training as a data processing technician and then, in 1988, she became a student at East Berlin’s Academy for Theology. After studying theology at Heidelberg and Berlin universities, she was a research assistant at the School for Theology at Marburg University, and in 2002 obtained her doctorate with a thesis on Protestant youth work in the Soviet Occupation Zone and East Germany. She has been active in a number of projects that aim to reappraise the history of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), among others the “Stiftung Aufarbeitung” (Federal Foundation for the Reappraisal of the SED Dictatorship), where she investigated the political persecution of young Christians. In 2004, she was ordained as a pastor.

# The new normal

Dennis A. Smith

*We were having Sunday lunch at one of those new, up-scale burger places that are popping up all over Latin America. Menus generally include veggie burgers, beef, pork, chicken – and, of course, craft beers. We were sitting at an inside counter. Our son noted a docile Labrador sitting with its family at an outside table.*

Unbeknownst to its family, the Labrador had managed to get itself tangled up in its leash. A back leg was completely immobilized, the corresponding front leg also trapped, lifted in permanent supplication. In patient discomfort, the dog awaited outside intervention.

Across the distance, the Labrador made eye contact with our son. “Look at that poor dog!” our son said, “See his face? He seems to be saying, “This is life now! This is the new normal!”

Our son got up, walked outside, and informed the family of the dog’s plight. Embarrassed, they quickly untangled their pet.

“This is life now: the new normal”. An apt metaphor for so much that is going on in today’s world. Fake news. Corruption. Lying and deception at the highest levels of government and industry. Confronted with such systemic dysfunction, we often feel paralyzed, powerless, without recourse.

The weaponization of information is hardly new. We can trace the dissemination of slander and falsehood for commercial gain and political advantage as far back as the 19th Century penny press in the USA. Yet today deception seems more widespread, more institutionalized, than ever. Sometimes the deception is amateurish, sometimes slick, polished with all the tricks technology can offer. As one unpacks the lies, they often reveal a coldly mercenary intelligence.

Particularly galling is that deception so seldom brings recrimination upon the deceivers.

Power has always fostered impunity, and the craftiness of the deceiver has always been celebrated in folklore. Deception today, globalized through social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, is different more in degree than in kind from that practiced throughout human history.

Because of the concentration of media conglomerates in the global North, the whole world is subject to the systemic lies of Fox News, RT News and Mr. Trump’s vivid tweet storms. But major media conglomerates in the global South, in close coordination with political, economic, and religious elites, also play this game. Here are two recent examples from Latin America:

- \* A careful review of current election campaigns in Colombia, Venezuela and Brazil reveals massive deception carefully calibrated to generate suspicion, distrust, and even hatred. The details presented – ideology, race, security, corruption, the economy – vary according to the hot button issues of each context. In Colombia, for example, a favorite tactic has been to portray Venezuelan immigrants and/or demobilized FARC guerrillas as being responsible for a perceived increase in citizen insecurity.
- \* Throughout the region, an LGBTQ “conspiracy” promoting a so-called “ideology of gender”, supposedly sponsored by gay activists in the US, is presented as a threat to traditional family values. Surprisingly, when sexual minorities are protected by government attempts to combat bullying or to assure access by minorities to education, these efforts are dismissed as an “insidious plot” against the traditional family. Evangelicals – a growing and important electoral constituency in Latin America – are told to be on guard against this conspiracy, as are traditional Roman Catholics. Ultra-conservative forces in the US work closely with TV evangelists and conservative political parties in the region to mount these campaigns.

Over the last five decades, a core element of WACC’s identity has been to promote and defend communication rights. From our early advocacy of the MacBride Report to ongoing campaigns to

empower the silenced and invisibilized, we have understood that once a community is denied a voice, their very existence can be in jeopardy.

During this time, WACC has moved from being a collective of denominational publishing houses and media producers based mostly in the global North, to being a network of institutions, communication professionals and grassroots initiatives based mostly in the global South.

In 2012, WACC's officers met in Busan, South Korea with other ecumenical agencies to prepare a statement on communication to be presented to the Busan Assembly of the World Council of Churches. In that statement, we noted:

“The world is a very different place from when the World Council of Churches addressed the issue of communication at the Uppsala (1968) and Vancouver (1983) Assemblies. Today, people everywhere, even children, share their stories through media platforms that are more powerful than those available to churches, governments and media conglomerates 30 years ago.”

These emerging global media platforms, in addition to making it much easier to keep up with friends and family, have proved propitious for the rapid spread of rumours and lies. Some such messages are carefully crafted by professionals to exacerbate existing stereotypes and prejudices;

sometimes they are crude and shabbily assembled. But no matter what their level of technical proficiency, such messages can impact elections, exacerbate hatred against minority and excluded groups, and foment social unrest.

We know this. We know that this is life now. But are we not also certain that we cannot accept this state of affairs as the new normal? Each of us can provide chilling and dramatic illustrations of the use of social media for deception and manipulation from our particular contexts.

Thus, as WACC enters a new decade, we must discern together what role WACC can play in addressing this complex and volatile issue. Here are some suggestions:

1. We must support efforts in the entertainment, information and social media industries to invest all necessary resources to develop and rigorously apply codes of conduct and effective mechanisms for self-regulation. Our previous contact with commercial media producers have taught us that they too have kids, are concerned about violence, discrimination and racism, and have not necessarily sold their souls to Mammon! We must identify and work with allies toward constructive change for the common good and support them as they seek to bring the rest of their industries on board.

2. Self-regulation is not sufficient. Such media platforms have become, in effect, an essential part of our communication infrastructure. Indeed, like potable water, public sanitation and the electricity grid, they have become, essentially, public utilities. As such, they must be accountable to the public and be regulated by legislation and appropriate government agencies. The recent implementation of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) by

*Children of Mayan cultural and oral tradition who speak kaqchikel learning community radio techniques at Radio Ixchel in Sumpango Sacatepéquez, Guatemala, in a project jointly supported by WACC and Cultural Survival.*



the European Union is one useful example of this. “Fake news”, however, is a more nuanced issue that needs to deal appropriately with freedom of expression issues. At least, social media platforms should not be profiting from the massive dissemination of unsubstantiated rumours and lies.

3. In the 1990s, WACC-Latin America was deeply involved in promoting *Lectura Crítica de los Medios* (Critical Reading of the Media, or Media Literacy). As media monopolies accumulated ever more political and economic power, we understood that if people were unable to differentiate between truth and lies, it would be the end of democracy. Through media literacy, we also understood that in a consumer society where identity is cobbled together from media images and one’s capacity to consume, we must develop our muscle for critical consumption of the media.

We also learned that we had to fight for access to the electromagnetic spectrum and for the inclusion of the silenced and invisibilized in media narratives. We learned that even those with limited formal education had the capacity to “re-signify” media narratives and use them for empowerment. Through edu-comunicación and similar programs we learned that media literacy needed to be incorporated in both public and private school curricula.

Through such vital, ongoing WACC projects as the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP), we have learned the value of alliances between communication professionals, the academy and grassroots media organizations to demand changes in how women and men are portrayed in the news media.

Similar methodologies have been applied to other issues such as the representation of poverty and violence in the news media. Now that the media landscape has evolved, WACC regions should promote development of media literacy strategies appropriate to their emerging contexts, empowering communities and individuals to be the subjects rather than the objects of today’s media.

4. Early in our experience as an Association, WACC understood the need to challenge such abuses as proselytism or fear-based manipulation

in religious media. In part, that is why we developed the Christian Principles of Communication in the early 80s as an ethical roadmap to orient messages broadcast in religious media. When he drafted the Christian Principles, Mike Traber formulated for us an expression of our core identity. We came to understand that communication that is coherent with the gospel creates community, is participatory, liberates, supports and develops cultures, and is prophetic.

In Latin America, and in other regions, communicators of other faiths and none came to embrace these principles as a worthy statement of ethical principles for communication professionals. In 2011, we revisited this expression of our common identity and drafted *Communication For All: Sharing WACC’s Principles*. In this revised document, we sought to respond to the emerging ethical challenges of a changing media landscape, lift up our connectedness to all of Creation and provide a platform for dialogue on communication issues with interfaith partners.

In *Communication for All* we affirmed that “there is a sacredness to the creation of meaning in common, in which communication reflects the spiritual values at the heart of human identity”.

The new normal? Our hope is that – through its members and regions – WACC can participate in building a new normal that reflects our dreams and aspirations for the common good. ■

Dennis A. Smith, a former President of WACC, has served for the last 41 years as a mission co-worker of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in Latin America. Since 2011, he has been based in Buenos Aires, Argentina as Regional Liaison for South America.

# Musings about WACC

Pradip N. Thomas

*There is no doubting the fact that WACC has played an important historical role in nurturing, shaping and expanding our understandings of communication ethics and communication rights via hundreds of projects spread throughout the world and through the facilitation of conversations on a range of issues inclusive of media gender justice, media and communication rights advocacy, community media.*

There is also a sense in which WACC has played a critical role in taking some of the key recommendations from the MacBride Commission forward, in particular the need for media alternatives. *Media Development*, as the flagship WACC journal, has also been influential and articles from it continue to be widely cited.

Looking back at the time that I spent at WACC, one thing that stands out is the fact that WACC was all about supporting a multitude of exogenous projects and initiatives although there was very little internal investment in systematically learning from the literally hundreds of projects that WACC supported over the years. This was especially true in the area of project support, where literally hundreds of thousands of dollars were spent on an annual basis and at that time very little was learned from the experience of project support.

Many projects, in the old days, were support for Christian mission in a narrow sense, although from the mid-70s onwards WACC's project portfolio reflected a growing sense that communication rights were for all, irrespective of caste and creed. The fact that WACC had the space to pursue this agenda, despite pressures from within, was the chief motivating factor for my own 15-year stint with WACC.

However this tension between remaining an open association for which there were supporters in the London office and the demand to remain "Christian" that was a very real regional demand, remained an issue, and in a sense was one of WACC's Achilles heels. The contradiction at the heart of the ecumenical movement to take a preferential option for the poor but not to acknowledge that the poor had the right to pursue the many pathways to liberation outside of the Christian experience was and presumably remains an issue for WACC and other like-minded Christian organisations.

Despite these contradictions, WACC had many friends among whom were many of the world's best known critical communication scholars who stood for global human rights – Herb Schiller, George Gerbner, Margaret Gallagher, James Halloran, Cees Hamelink, Kaarle Nordenstreng, Robert White, Anna Reading, Seán MacBride, Stuart Hall, Jesus Martín-Barbero, Gabriel Garcia Canclini, Robert Hackett, Philip Schlesinger, Ruth Teer Tomaselli and Keyan Tomaselli, Stuart Hoover, Jan Servaes, Bruce Girard, among many more who form an illustrious roll call.

Given this roll call of names, it is unsurprising that WACC's research agenda was closely tied to that of the International Association for Mass Communication Research (IAMCR).<sup>1</sup> Even the fact that Seán MacBride nearly became President of WACC is a reflection of WACC's standing in the field. Then WACC had the energies of indefatigable communicators such as Michael Traber. And the world's communication scholars contributed to its journal *Media Development*.

One could argue, that since aid for communications was in its infancy, WACC had very really little competition and enjoyed a lot of goodwill. WACC acted as a laboratory for expanding understandings of communication rights and a number of scholars continue to acknowledge WACC's formative role in the trajectory that their own careers subsequently took. WACC has played a key role in shaping conversations around communication ethics, communication rights, communication and social change, community media, gender media justice, and media and religion.

*Communication for social change work taking place in rural Vietnam.*

*Photo: UNESCO.*

So much water under the bridge. And so much change that the world of communications and WACC have experienced over the last two decades. WACC is no longer in the public eye like it used to be, a reflection, in some part, of a reduction in funding but also the move out of London to Toronto, that may have been motivated by rising costs in London but that perhaps did not result in the advantages that it was supposed to have gained.

Today, there are a host of international NGOs involved in supporting citizen-based media projects, some like the Open Society Foundation backed by funding from Soros. Others like Internews supported by USAID and health communication projects that are supported by the Gates Foundation. We are also in a situation where there are any number of media-specific apex bodies and networks dedicated to community radio, internet advocacy, and participatory video.

So, one issue for WACC today is what to focus on in a context in which there have been major changes including, of course, the challenges brought by the confluence of new media and politics, fake news, surveillance, sousveillance and the like.

In the context of decreasing funding opportunities, I think that it would make sense to focus on a limited number of areas – but importantly to create a strategic five year plan in two distinct areas – media & gender where WACC does have a global reputation through their support for the GMMP and GAMAG, and communication rights that in a sense underlies much of the work supported under the WACC label. Rather than supporting projects per se in both areas, the aim should be to deal with both issues in context. Perhaps a theoretical framework for this initiative can be drawn from Amartya Sen's capabilities approach with an accent on strengthening capabilities in the context



of supportive, enabling environments.

I believe that this would give an opportunity for WACC to understand how access to and use of communication can make a difference in people's lives. It would give an opportunity to understand context – the role played by culture, hierarchies, power flows, enabling institutions, all the requirements that are necessary for people to own and use communication.

I am thinking of a model such as the one used by Rhizomatica in Mexico – where this NGO has partnered with local indigenous communities to create local telecom coops that provide numerous services to local communities. While the NGO facilitates the deployment of resources such as technology and is involved in advocacy, training, documentation, and exploring sustainability – the local community plays a key role in determining what local connectivity needs are, and local capacities are developed in and through the provisioning of local services.

To operationalize this within WACC, there would be a need for two distinct teams – one working in the area of media and gender and the other in communication rights, who have both specialised skills and the ability to work in partnership with local communities. The teams would

be tasked with working on dedicated community communications initiatives and the objective would be to strengthen local capacities, explore sustainability and community ownership.

WACC would need to take a deliberate decision to scale down other activities that it is involved in and focus on a small set of activities that are funded over the long term. I am of the opinion that such projects would generate textured research data on the affordances of community-based communications and the various factors that contribute to community-based communications and connectivity. Despite the many thousands of dollars that have been spent on community communications initiatives, there is precious little information available on local ecologies of practice, the sustainability of such initiatives and understandings of how genuine capacities can be developed and sustained within local communities.

WACC will be involved in a bridging role – enabling and facilitating the processes required to legitimise, build, maintain and sustain community communication projects. It will employ nimble and agile staff who are not only specialists but who also have the capacity to explore and create opportunities, take decisions, connect with larger networks, and establish communities of practice. These projects will be explicitly secular, meaning that WACC's Christian roots and values will be reinforced not by what they say but what they do. WACC's principles articulated in the document *Communication for all: Sharing WACC's Principles* states on page 6 that:

“Communication rights claim spaces and resources in the public sphere for everyone to be able to engage in transparent, informed and democratic debate. They claim unfettered access to the information and knowledge essential to democracy, empowerment, responsible citizenship and mutual accountability. They claim political, social and cultural environments that encourage the free exchange of a diversity of creative ideas, knowledge and cultural products. Finally, communication rights insist on the need to ensure a

diversity of cultural identities that together enhance and enrich the common good.”

These words do not represent a manifesto for any specific religious or denominational communication. On the contrary, they restate the case for a communications for all people who belong to a diversity of cultural identities. The common good transcends the narrow horizons of any given religious community including that of WACC. And the challenge for WACC is to practice that commitment.

Let me conclude by quoting another WACC stalwart, T K Thomas, who happened to be my father. In a piece entitled “Credible Communication”, which I think he wrote when he was at the World Council of Churches in the 1980s, he pointed out some of the issues with the practice of Christian communications:

“What is worse, we have imitated the popular media in our communication efforts, building up bishops and celebrating anniversaries of consecrations, making much of our own activities and taking no notice of others, being parochial when we should be denominational, being denominational when we should be ecumenical, and being ‘Christian’ when we should be human”.<sup>2</sup>

Not that Christian communication is unimportant, just that WACC's mandate is to work towards communication for all. ■

#### Notes

1. Today called the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR).
2. *An Ecumenical Wordsmith: The Writings of T K Thomas* (2002), CSS Publications, Tiruvella.

Pradip N. Thomas (PhD) was WACC's director of studies and publications and co-editor of its journal *Media Development*. He is currently Associate Professor and Co-Director of the Centre for Communication and Social Change at the School of Journalism and Communications, University of Queensland, Australia. A leading academic in the area of communication and social change, Thomas is also on the advisory boards of a number of international institutes including the India Media Centre at the University of Westminster. He is the author and/or editor of several books.

# Communication makes relationship possible

Carlos A. Valle

*I would like to congratulate WACC on its 50th anniversary. It seems like only yesterday that we were in London celebrating our 25th anniversary. “As time goes by” Today, this celebration is a good opportunity to share words of deep appreciation and gratitude to all those who during this time have served in this ministry of communication.*

I would like to recall all those who has demonstrated willingness to assume diverse responsibilities, and especially the creativity and commitment of the staff and their ability to work as a team. This was my experience during the years I served WACC, and I can say the same for the work done during the following years of drastic change. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all of them.

I offer to WACC my best wishes for a most prosperous future. At the same time, as you want to look forward, I would like to mention some of the lessons I have learned during my working time in WACC. These will be neither an evaluation nor a recollection of achievements or failures. In some cases, they came to reinforce previous convictions and in others they helped to discover new challenges. I shared some of these lessons in my last report to the Central Committee (July 2001) and I would like to say that they are still relevant.

## **The decisive role of communication**

What WACC declared in Manila in 1989 during its first Congress could be repeated today “Communication is a crucial issue for the 1990s and for

the future of humankind It can lead to reconciliation or destruction. It can bring knowledge and disinformation and lies.” In the 21st century this is still true.

To speak of communication today is to understand what was affirmed in our first document on “Christian Principles of Communication” – its enormous capacity to create community, liberate and support and develop cultures. At the same time, we cannot ignore its dominant and oppressive potential that can be spread within systems led by profit and where the concentration of power in a few hands is on the increase.

What is at stake here in communication is the future of society, because at the heart of communication there is a constant struggle between humanization and dehumanization. This is a dilemma that is seen everywhere. As was mentioned in an evaluation report on the work of WACC, “In this global situation, the quest for a more just information and communication order continues to challenge us.” So if this is our current reality, where are we as a Christian organization? Whom are we serving in our priorities?

Let me mention at least one example. The advent of the mass media was well received by the churches, although they expressed certain fears. For this reason, they tried to reduce the media to being instruments at their service, and they considered themselves suited to teaching their correct use. Furthermore, they had a strong mistrust of the audience, which, according to them, had to be protected, directed and controlled. Generally, paternalism leads to domestication.

Today, the biggest criticism levelled by the churches is that the media are taking religion’s place in society. Among other things, religious language is being appropriated. New symbols, images and rites are being created and religious themes having no connection with organized religion are being developed.

We live in pluralistic societies where people’s relationship with organized religion has been weakened, and yet spiritual needs appear more manifest. Is it possible and desirable to use media as new channels for expressing spiritual concerns?

No simple answer can be given to this question. Many considerations have to be taken into account: media ownership, legislation, professional rivalry, economic interests, social and cultural mores, the media as a supermarket of religion, and many more.

We should keep in mind that communication is not offered to mass audiences. People receive, select and interpret messages from their own social and cultural viewpoints and, based on that interpretation, draw their own conclusions. For this reason, genuine Christian communication reveals an attitude of respect for the dignity of other people.

### **WACC as an ecumenical organization**

In Budapest (1995), I shared with the Central Committee some thoughts about the theme “WACC and the Ecumenical Movement”. I have nothing special to add to what I said on that occasion, except to stress some of the points mentioned. *First*, WACC cannot be understood in isolation from the ecumenical movement. It was born and nourished in it. *Second*, WACC should be grateful for all it has received from the ecumenical movement. WACC has been enriched in communication with other cultures, supported in times of adversity, shared common concerns for justice and peace, worked for marginalized people, women and youth, and learned to be together in solidarity. All those who for many years were active in WACC’s life could

give examples of many places in the world that have been – and still are – a challenge and stimulus in the life of the ecumenical movement.

*Third*, WACC’s mission is at the frontier. The frontier is a place of encounter, an area of new territories. The communication frontier is an area of increasing links. At this frontier we, as Christian communicators, are committed to communication for human dignity. At this frontier we are called to be open to all communicators of goodwill who share this commitment, and work together, learning from each other, knowing that there is no sharing without fellowship.

### **Forum and advocacy activities**

When critical reflection has been abandoned in some places, it is important that WACC continues reflecting on those areas that are decisive for the future of a just and peaceful society. There is a long road to go. Injustices, concentration of power, increasing poverty, lack of real communication, are our daily bread in the world. Communicators need to be prepared to face all these challenges.

In this globalized free market economy, everything is presented as if it responded to fixed and inexorable natural laws. Nothing can be changed; all must be as it is. Nevertheless, this is not the last word. Communication is a challenging presence with a critical word that produces changes in the life of our world and its social structures.

Communication should look for a world where the first priority is caring for and protecting the most defenceless in our societies. That means working so that people have a chance to express themselves, to react and protest; to dream and to share dreams; to strengthen their sense of dignity and to emphasise their right to full participation in the life of society.

*Carlos A. Valle (right) taking part in WACC’s Congress 1995 together with Samuel Ruiz García (left), who served as bishop of the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico, from 1959 until 1999.*



## Matters pending

Finally, I would like to make a brief reference to some of the permanent matters pending, because they have to be always present on the agenda.

*Firstly*, WACC's relationship with the churches. It must be possible to find a way to be closer to the churches. They need to know that they can count on WACC. The churches, whose communication work has always been essential to mission, do not always realize the very nature of today's communication.

*Secondly*, the importance of networking. It is necessary to be closer to all authentic communication; to have a closer relationship with the academic world, at the regional and global level; a closer relationship with women's initiatives. It is necessary to appreciate the responsible way in which women are carrying out their work in communication. Their ability to relate to each other, to establish networks and be involved in concrete form of actions in defence of their rights are remarkable.

*Thirdly*, to open doors to young communicators. Young people are, more and more, attracted by new technologies. The number of young people who want to dedicate their energies to communication is constantly increasing. The training of future leaders will continue to be a high priority.

As was affirmed in the Mexico Declaration (WACC Congress 1995), "To be human is to communicate. Communication makes relationship possible. Through communication humanity can intensify its struggle against dehumanization so that the oikumene – the whole inhabited world – may realize dignity and grace." ■

Carlos A. Valle, a Methodist minister from Argentina, was WACC General Secretary 1986-2001. A former President of INTERFILM, the Protestant film organization, Valle was a staff member of the ecumenical theological school, ISIDET, in Buenos Aires, where he taught various courses on communication, especially film and theology. Upon retiring, Carlos returned to Argentina to serve as a chaplain to students at ISIDET in Buenos Aires, where he continues to write on issues related to communication, to work for his church, and to take an active part in promoting communication rights and social justice. Valle has written several books, published in both Spanish and English. They include *Comunicación es evento* (1988), *Comunicación: modelo para armar* (1990), and *Communication and Mission: In the Labyrinth of Globalisation* (2002).

# What is Christian communication in the face of widespread exposure of abusive Christianity?

**Peter Horsfield**

*The recent public exposure of extensive sexual abuse of children and adults by Christian leaders, and its prolonged cover-up by other Christian leaders, has arguably had a greater impact on the current public standing and perception of Christianity than any other single factor in the past century.*

A significant part of this impact lies in the fact that the exposure has not been due to Christian churches taking the initiative to embody their own beliefs and to act publicly in line with the moral behaviour they demand of others. The exposure has been brought about by courageous victims refusing to be silenced and intimidated by Christian authorities, and by secular civil agencies such as journalism, the law, and political enquiries persisting in the face of strong resistance from churches, to expose the extensive criminal and abusive ethos of the religion.

The extent of the abuse and its exposure have been global. For the first time, tens of thousands of vulnerable living people on every continent have been given support against the intimidation of powerful religious institutions to name the abuse they were subject to and to speak publicly about the impacts of that abuse. And for the tens of thousands of others still alive who haven't spoken publicly, they have seen for the first time their experience named publicly as a basis for re-

building their lives.

Many in churches attempt to dismiss the significance of this on a variety of grounds: that the abuse was just a few bad apples in the barrel; or was primarily in just one branch of Christianity; or that Christian leaders were acting with the best intentions in line with social understanding and expectations of the time; or that many Christian leaders were kept in the dark and weren't aware of it; or that Christian leaders were trying to balance the good of all; or that focusing just on abuse and ignoring all the good that Christianity has done is a biased perspective. These excuses ignore both the accounts and the data on the extent of the abuse, its devastating personal effects, its presence in all branches of Christianity, and the complicity in the abuse at all levels of functional and representative Christian leadership.

### **Identity and integrity**

For Christianity as it has been traditionally embodied in organised churches, the exposure presents a critical question of identity and integrity for its members. If those appointed or elected to define and represent the core character and ethos of the religion are found to be living by another ethos, does the ethos itself have any integrity? The diminishing involvement of people in Christian institutional activities is an augury of this loss of confidence.

For Christianity as it seeks to present or communicate itself in the public sphere, the exposure has diminished the social capital of selflessness and good will with which Christian communications were previously received. This was apparent in a public debate between Cardinal George Pell and Richard Dawkins on the Australian television current affairs program Q&A several years ago. Cardinal Pell began one of his responses by saying, "I remember when I was in England we were preparing some young English boys" At this point the studio audience began laughing and the camera cut to Richard Dawkins smiling. Pell tried to continue by saying, "Preparing them" at which point the audience began booing and the Moderator was forced to intervene by saying to the audience, "Come on."

The incident brings to the fore two dimensions of Christian communication. One is the communication that is attempted through the words of appointed Christian authorities in crafted statements and symbolic actions. The other is the communication that takes place through actions. What the sexual abuse scandal has brought to public awareness is that there has been a vast discrepancy between the two and the social and political power that has been claimed or conceded to Christian institutions, particularly in the global west and south, is not worthy.

Previously such highlights of the discrepancies and destructiveness of religion were dismissed as being simply expressions of a few militant or pathological anti-religious partisans. The exposure of extensive and sanctioned sexual abuse within Christian institutions is shifting the sentiment for an increasing number of people away from the intellectual to the existential and it is becoming apparent that an increasing number of national populations are reading or hearing what is communicated by Christian institutions in a less deferential, less preferential, more informed way. Christian churches have contributed significantly to this by their responses to the exposure. A number of aspects of this response are noteworthy.

### **Wealth protection**

The overriding message being communicated by church responses to sexual abuse is that Christianity's primary concern is to protect its wealth and look after its leaders. Just one example: during its investigations from 2013 to 2017, the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse brought to public attention the Australian Catholic Church's response to a claim for compensation brought by John Ellis, a former altar boy abused by a priest in the 1970s.

When Ellis brought his complaint and claim to the Sydney archdiocese in 2002, the archdiocese, then led by Cardinal Pell, acknowledged the abuse and offered him \$25,000 in compensation. Ellis rejected the offer and proposed a settlement of \$100,000. The archdiocese dismissed Ellis's proposal and then spent eight times that amount fighting him in court, arguing successfully that the

Catholic Church could not be sued because it did not exist as an entity. After winning the case, the church threatened to pursue Ellis for its legal costs until public opposition caused them not to proceed. Various political steps are now being taken to change the law that exempts some churches from legal accountability.

One of the reasons the Catholic Church in Australia gave for fighting the level of compensation given to victims of abuse was to maintain its extensive welfare work. However a recent investigation by The Age newspaper found that the Catholic Church in Australia had property and financial assets in excess of \$30 billion and that its welfare work was largely tax-payer, not church funded. The newspaper investigation found that the Catholic Church in the state of Victoria has assets in excess of \$9 billion, and at the time the church was in a legal battle with two parents seeking fair compensation for the sexual abuse of their two daughters as children by a priest, one of whom suicided and the other suffered brain damage through self-harm.

The Church spent \$2.25 million buying a mansion in an exclusive suburb for its archbishop's residence, and another \$872,000 on a beach house with bay views for the archbishop's exclusive recreational use. In the U.S.A., where the church is not immune from legal challenge, according to a 2012 report in The Economist some churches have been transferring church funds into unrelated trusts to protect them, while drawing on employee's retirement funds to meet enforced settlement costs.

A second overriding public perception from churches' responses to revelations of sexual abuse is that churches are not willing to be honest and transparent, are cowardly, and are concerned primarily for their own interests. As a result, the message is being perceived that churches and church leaders are not trustworthy. In dealing with the challenges and ramifications of the exposure of sexual abuse, with scant if any theological reflection, church leaders have adopted corporate crisis-management tactics in dealing with the issue. Using their corporate resources, church leaders commonly employ legal advisers, finan-

cial advisers, public relations consultants or crisis management experts to "handle" the crisis.

Acting on this advice, church leaders commonly avoid acknowledging any fault, avoid saying anything clearly in a unambiguous way, issue apologies that are crafted to avoid acknowledgment and acceptance of responsibility and promise that action is being taken to address the problem to ensure it doesn't happen again. Symbolic actions are created to make it appear that the church has compassion, such as papal or presidential pastoral meetings with abuse survivors that are carefully controlled to ensure only compliant and appreciative church members are present while keeping outside others who have been screwed over by the system.

The third dominant message communicated by Christianity's handling of its sexual abuse is the hypocritical disconnect between public statements and behaviour of its leaders in related issues such as sexual harassment of women and equality of recognition for loving homosexual relationships. This was illustrated recently in the behaviour and pronouncements of Australia's former Deputy Prime Minister. He was a leading opponent of the move to legalise gay marriage, arguing as a father and a Christian that doing so would undermine the importance of marriage and the family which were the foundations of society.

Four months after the legislation was passed (with the support of more than 60% of the population), the self-acknowledged Christian Deputy Prime Minister was revealed as having a long affair with a staffer, who was now pregnant by him (he questioned that for a period), for whom he had found well-paid employment in the offices of a number of ministerial colleagues, and for whom he had left his wife and four daughters to live with in a rent-free apartment provided for him by a wealthy businessman in his electorate.

Coincidental with these exposures, we see worldwide a declining public involvement in Christian institutional activities, the rise of de-institutionalised religion, and the rise of Christianity as a "benefit" religion. Is there any redemption for churches in responding to this situation in a way that can be communicated?

## Honesty and remorse

A number of years ago, as the issue of sexual abuse within churches was beginning to break in Australia and I became involved as an advocate on behalf of victims, I proposed that the issue gave churches a unique opportunity in the way it responded to the situation to model and communicate the core of its beliefs about how wrong-doing is restored. One was in what was said – telling the truth honestly about what was done, not in corporate doublespeak, acknowledging the wrong and showing genuine remorse. The other was in what was done – paying to restore the damage and to reaffirm the integrity of the victims and taking clear and transparent action to ensure that the wrong does not happen again. These are the only basis for genuine forgiveness to take place. Obviously not much notice was taken.

I think it is not too late for churches to respond and communicate effectively, but the price now is much higher. I propose therefore a radical, penitent Christian redemptive action.

All churches should give a tithe – a tenth of their property assets and financial investments – for the creation of an independent foundation, free of any church connections or control and headed by highly respected community leaders, to address, remedy the damage and restore those who are victims of sexual abuse as children.

A tithe seems like a large amount. For the Roman Catholic Church in Australia it would be a tithe of \$3 billion. For other churches, maybe \$100 million. Some would say that it's impossible and unrealistic, but it's manageable by selling assets that are empty or under-utilised and reducing the size of churches' investment reserves and it's slowly being dragged out of them by the secular legal system anyway. And if Jesus is to be believed, churches are being unfaithful to their beliefs by holding such a large amount of wealth and it would provide a powerful witness to a capitalist dominated global economy.

The money would be used through the foundation to develop and provide comprehensive information and services that allowed victims/survivors of abuse perpetrated in silence and secrecy across our communities, to be restored.

The Foundation would provide or coordinate educational materials, counselling support, grants of money to re-establish personal foundations to build on, mentoring support for relationships or employment, and research to further understanding. In doing so, it would liaise with other community agencies and services.

When it has spoken with its money in this way, churches would then have a more honest basis on which to speak about its regret and why it is doing this, and for its speaking to be taken more seriously than what it is now. It would need only one national or regional church to take the initiative to start the movement.

For fifty years, WACC has been enunciating, promoting and working with this understanding of what genuine Christian communication should be: building and shaping community, promoting freedom for all people, affirming justice and challenging injustice, demanding accountability and building connectedness.

It is that practice of communication that has been most liberating for victims of abuse, embodied practically for them in survivors' networks, sexual assault centres and investigative journalism. They also provide a roadmap to churches on how to respond to this crisis. Why do churches continue to place greater importance on the advice of their legal, financial, crisis management and public relations advisers than on the fundamental principles of their own ethos? ■

Peter Horsfield retired as Professor of Communication at RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia, in 2016. He holds undergraduate degrees in Arts and Divinity from University of Queensland and a PhD from Boston University. His research and publications have focused on various aspects of the interaction of media and religion, including religious television, theology, virtual reality and contemporary and historical perspectives on the place of media in the development of Christianity. He was one of the early critics and researchers on sexual abuse by clergy in Australian churches. He is the author of *From Jesus to the Internet: A History of Christianity and Media* (2015).

# On the screen

## Nyon (Switzerland) 2018

In 2018, the Interreligious Jury awarded its Prize endowed with CHF 5,000 to the film *Almost Nothing* directed by Anna de Manincor and ZimmerFrei (Italy, France, Belgium, 2018). Religious affiliation or nationality seem to be of no importance at CERN. Nevertheless, the film (still below) shows in a most convincing manner how the search for the meaning of life unites the scientists even into the smallest particle. The film succeeds in picturing the human being behind science in a humorous way and at a high level. At the same time, the film shows those human beings in an unexpected religious context.

In addition, the jury gave a Commendation to the film *Stories of the Half-Light* (Storie del Dormiveglia) directed by Luca Magi (Italy, 2018). The poem-like film, at a high aesthetical level, gives the human beings who are nearly voiceless a voice and gives them back their dignity.

An interreligious jury appointed by SIGNIS (World Association for Catholic Communication and INTERFILM (International Inter-Church Film Organisation) has been present at the Fes-

tival Visions du Réel in Nyon (Switzerland) since 2005. The jury includes a representative of a member of INTERFILM and SIGNIS and a member of Jewish and Muslim faith.

The jury awards a prize to a feature-length film of the international competition and possibly a commendation that sheds light on existential, social or spiritual questions as well as human values. The prize of CHF 5,000 is donated by jointly by the Swiss Catholic Church and Médias-pro, the Media Department of Reformed Churches in the French speaking part Switzerland (CER), and the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities.

The members of the Interreligious Jury 2018 nominated by the Swiss representatives of SIGNIS and INTERFILM were Praxedis Bouwman (The Netherlands); Natalie Fritz (Switzerland) – President; Majid Movasseghi (Switzerland); Daniel Zuta (Germany).

## Cannes (France) 2018

At the 71st Festival de Cannes (8-19 May 2018) the Ecumenical Jury, appointed by INTERFILM and SIGNIS, awarded its Prize to *Capharnaüm* directed by Nadine Labaki (Lebanon, 2018).

Motivation: Throughout the Competition, it is women and children, the immigrants and outcasts, who have shown by their perseverance and ingenuity, love and courage, the full possibil-





ity of the human spirit. Zain, a 12 year old boy (still above), is suing his parents for giving him life. Holding nothing back, the director meets the extreme plight of children with fearless humanity.

In addition, the jury awarded a Commendation to *BlacKkKlansman* directed by Spike Lee (USA, 2018).

Motivation: The jury commended *BlacKkKlansman*, a wake-up call about continuing racism not only in the USA, but for the wider world. Told through humour and horror, this film condemns the misappropriation of religion in the cause of hatred.

The members of the 2018 Jury were: Inês Mendes Gil, Portugal – President of the Jury; Pierre-Auguste Henry, France; Robert K. Johnston, USA; Alain le Goanvic, France; Richard Leonard, Australia; Thomas Schüpbach, Switzerland.

## Zlin (Czech Republic) 2018

At the 58th International Film Festival for Children and Youth (25 May to 2 June 2018) the Ecumenical Jury, appointed by INTERFILM and SIGNIS, awarded its Prize to *Supa Modo* directed by Likarion Wainaina (Kenya/Germany, 2018).

Motivation: The Ecumenical jury gave its

prize to an emotional story; simple, pure, but still profound. This film invites us to face death from the perspective of a little girl, who does it with dignity, joy and courage. Like a real superhero.

The members of the jury in 2018 were: Marianela Pinto, Ecuador (President of the Jury); Ylva Liljeholm, Sweden; Jonáš Vacek, Czech Republic.

## Kiev (Ukraine) 2018

At the 47th International Film Festival Kyiv “Molodist” (27 May to 3 June 2018) the Ecumenical Jury, appointed by INTERFILM and SIGNIS, awarded its Prize in the international competition for full-length films to *Retablo* directed by Álvaro Delgado-Aparicio (Peru, Germany, Norway, 2018).

Motivation: 14-year-old Segundo is taught the craft of making retablos, Peruvian story-boxes, by his father. But his world collapses when he witnesses an incident. Nevertheless, his love for his father gives him the strength to move ahead. The director captivates us with the colourful and lively world he portrays and the respect he shows for the Quechuan culture of the Andes.

The Prize in the international competition for short films went to *Petites filles* (Grams) directed by Camille Japy (France, 2017).

Motivation: Under the shock of death,

mother-daughter relationships rekindle the life force. The film reminds us with humour and in an unexpected way that death is an integral part of life.

The Prize in the international competition for student films went to *Mit'* (The Moment) directed by Julia Tamtura (Ukraine, 2018).

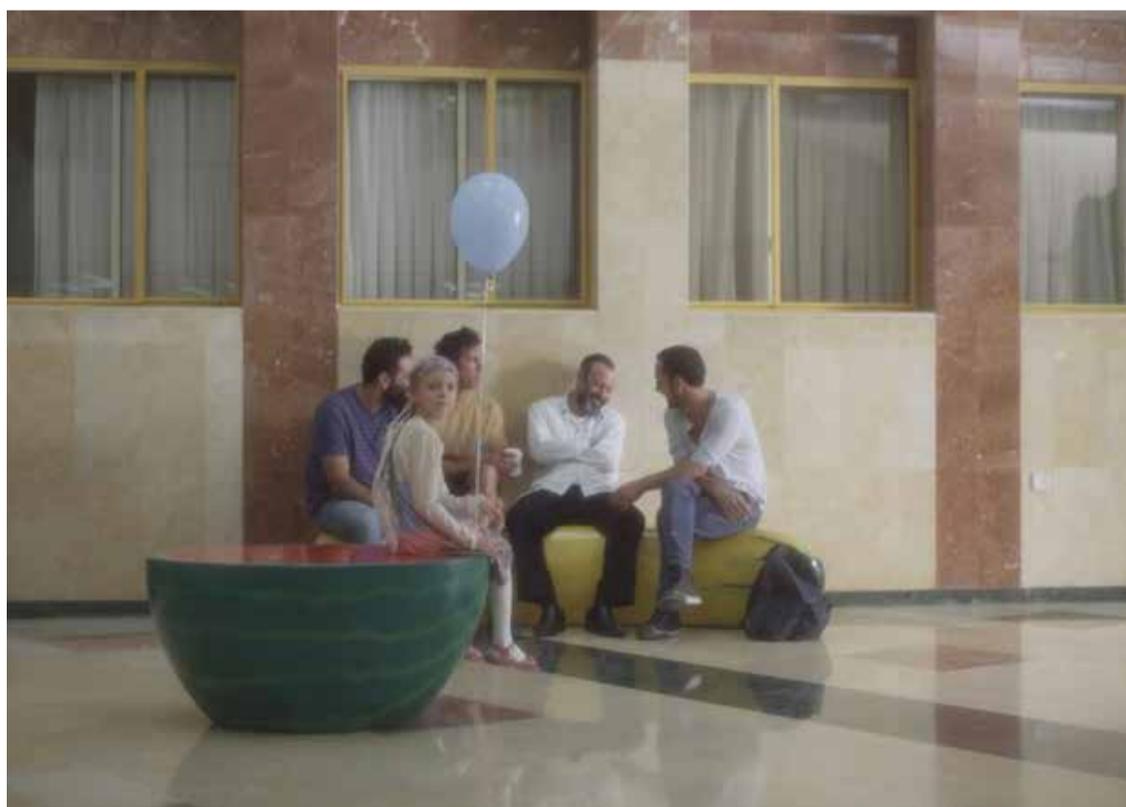
Motivation: In only six minutes, the film shows the power of love. From the ruins of his house, a young soldier phones his mother and shares with her his belief in a hopeful and peaceful future.

The members of the jury in 2018 were: Marianna Kavka, Ukraine; Jacques Vercueils, France; Rita Weinert, Germany (President of the Jury).

## Karlovy Vary (Poland) 2018

At the 53rd International Film Festival Karlovy Vary (June 29 - July 7, 2018), the Ecumenical Jury awarded its Prize to the film *Geula* (Redemption) directed by Joseph Madmony and Boaz Yehonatan Yacov, Israel, 2018 (still below).

Motivation: A man goes through the process of redemption and reconciliation while trying to save his ill daughter. The jury awards the film for overcoming all kinds of narrow-mindedness to discover the healing beauty of openness and



hope; for showing that God and humanity cannot be confined just to a set of rules and that one has to have a courage to be; and for its artistic quality which serves the story by adding another dimension to the experience of the struggle it tells.

In addition, the jury awarded Commendations to the films *Všechno bude* (Winter Flies) directed by Olmo Omerzu, Czech Republic, Slovenia, Poland, Slovakia, 2018. Motivation: The Jury awarded the film (still above) for its poetic cinematography and a story which portrays the process of changing naïve dreams and finding a new perspective of reality and home.

A Commendation also went to *Miriam miente* (Miriam Lies) directed by Natalia Cabral and Oriol Estrada, Dominican Republic, Spain, 2018. Motivation: Using a meaningful style the director tells a simple story that subtly reveals the important issues of race, social status, false dreams and growing-up with integrity.

The members of the 2018 jury were: Milja Radovic, United Kingdom (President of the Jury); Michael Otrisal, Czech Republic; David Sipoš, Slovenia. ■