In what ways has the digital era changed the notion of public space?

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Introduction

The US-based Project for Public Spaces (n.d.), after "evaluating thousands of [physical] public spaces around the world", defined four characteristics of a successful public space: "they are **accessible**; people are engaged in **activities** there; the space is **comfortable** and has a good image; and finally, it is a **sociable** place: one where people meet each other and take people when they come to visit" (original emphasis). For digital public spaces, PublicSpaces (2021) in the Netherlands holds that a public digital space should be **open**, **transparent**, **accountable**, **sovereign** and **user-centric**, which focuses less on the citizens using the space rather than the governance and experience of it. Each of these nine characteristics can be mapped onto public communication spaces, both digital and analogue, and in this paper the WACC Working Group on Public Space will consider how and why these elements are enabled, curtailed or strengthened in the digital era.

Context for the deliberations of the WACC Working Group on Public Space

Key to those understandings of public space is the idea that "*([s]ocial) space is a (social) product*" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 26, original emphasis): space is explicitly produced by social and political forces, and can be produced differently by changing, redirecting or limiting those influences. Acknowledging that spaces are constructed through power dynamics leads Lefebvre to state "[t]here is a politics of space because space is political" (cited in Elden, 2007, p. 107). Our examination of public communication spaces is framed by this understanding of spaces as socially constructed, politically valent entities.

Another vital concept is that of the "public sphere", devised by Habermas (2006 [1989]) to describe the space where the state and society openly communicate, with citizens able to express their ideas and discuss theories and practices which impact on the common good. Scholars have since amplified

Habermas’ concept from its upper-middle-class roots to recognise the participation of diverse non-traditional groups within the centralised public sphere, or within “counter” or “little” public spheres which unite smaller communities (Fraser, 1990; Hickey-Moody, 2016).

Habermas’ public sphere is intimately linked to public spaces, digital or otherwise, yet it is essential that we clearly distinguish between the “public sphere” and “public space(s)”. We understand that the public sphere is linked to political discourse and related actions, and that it is merely one of many overlapping, interrelated kinds of public space which can address all and sundry topics, ideas and areas of life.

For an individual, group or community to participate fully in a public communication space, their voice must be enabled. Nick Couldry emphasises that voice is a crucial democratic tool in the face of the prevailing neoliberal political structure, and recognises it as a value to be embodied in individuals, projects and policies, and an active process through which speakers “give an account of themselves and of their place in the world” (2010, p. 1). When people experience “the denial of the right of people to influence the decisions that affect their lives, and the right to participate in that decision making” , this is termed “voice poverty” (Tacchi, 2008). This has historically been the case for groups excluded by material poverty, lack of education, disability or gender (among many other life circumstances and identity categories). Voice poverty continues to disproportionately impact minoritised groups, despite the unifying force of shared identities in our networked communities (Castells, 2010).

The struggle for citizens to take their rightful place in communicating their needs, ideas and decisions has long been the focus of the movement for communication rights, which WACC has been a part of for over five decades. To avoid reinventing decades of campaigning, let’s spotlight important achievements in an ongoing campaign, beginning with the UN World Summits for the Information Society (WSIS), held in Geneva in 2003 and Tunis in 2005 (Thomas, 2006). At these summits, debates around “the information society” (which had been developing since the 1970s) crossed paths with discourses around global access to communication, which had been epitomised by the UNESCO MacBride Report (International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems, 2004 [1980]). The MacBride Report gave a framework to the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) that emphasised communication rights for the non-western world (Ó Siochrú, 2004). Once the WSIS process was announced, the Communication Rights in the Information Society (CRIS) Campaign was launched to respond in November 2001 with the aim of bringing civil society voices together – despite members’ scepticism at the WSIS’s paradigm in clear support of “the neoliberal globalization of ICTs” ("Communication rights in the information society: The CRIS campaign," 2002; Ó Siochrú, 2004, p. 209). Despite this and the limitations of civil actors’ participation, CRIS’s work (including that of WACC) was invaluable in raising significant global issues and in establishing a broad, united, transnational agenda for communication rights (Mueller, Kuerbis, & Pagé, 2007; Ó Siochrú, 2004; Thomas, 2006; WSIS Civil Society, 2005).

The work of the CRIS Campaign trained and influenced campaigners worldwide, and in that same spirit other important communiqués around communication rights have since been released. We particularly note the 2014 *Delhi Declaration for a Just and Equitable Internet* (Just Net Coalition, 2014) which led to the Digital Justice Manifesto, released in 2019 and entitled *A Call to Own Our Digital Future* (WACC, 2020), as well as the important *Feminist Principles of the Internet* (2016) which continues to be translated and disseminated. These three statements share a marked focus on the perspectives, rights and needs of historically excluded groups, such as women, linguistic minorities, Indigenous nations and residents of the Global South. Each continues to resonate within the communication rights movement, although we note ruefully that the United Nations’ proposed

Declaration of Digital Independence from 2019 (UN Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation (UNSG), 2019) has not gained a foothold and its associated website is no longer active as of September 2021.

We also note that the Assembly of the World Council of Churches has focused on the issue of communications three times before, in Uppsala (1968), Vancouver (1983) and most recently in Busan, South Korea, in 2013, where it considered the *Busan Communication Statement* produced in the consultation process prior (World Council of Churches, 2012). That statement was aimed at "[r]eclaiming communication for life, justice and peace", and is a recognition that – through the lens of Christian faith – we can recognise, identify and name the unjust and domineering communication systems which are integrated into our lives. By means of prophetic communication, we can work to confront, challenge and transform power structures with our core commitment to justice, dignity and equity for all.

When considered through the eyes of faith, the increasingly powerful media and communications corporations, infrastructures and systems can be considered as Biblical "Principalities", "Authorities", "Regencies" or "Dominions" operating in "our time of globalization" (Stackhouse, 2001, pp. 73, 74). We can also recognise that these mediatic forces are "'demonic' in the sense that they grab and possess people and are in need not only of counter-forces but of fundamental conversion" (p. 74). Their imposed universality also creates "a common 'world', which offers the basis for common discourse, the common good, and a 'public theology' on social, ethical and other issues" (D'Costa, 2005, p. 83), through which faith communities can contribute to reassessing and realigning these public communication spheres for the faithful and unfaithful alike. For the former, Hainsworth (2010) considers that public theology, which has long roots but new opportunities when channelled through online technologies, can "equip [faith community] members for faithful deliberation" and allow them to "recognise and respond to the changed landscape of proclamation and communication" (pp. 223, 225). According to theologian and sociologist Jacques Ellul (1980), we are living within a global technological system which has assumed the character of a sacred force, calling forth awe and veneration. Today, the climate emergency is exposing how dangerously that worship threatens our planet. The technological system as a whole must be *de-sacralised* and re-oriented towards the common good. We accordingly consider the practice of public theology as vital to responding to the challenges posed by the technological and communication environment in which we all live.

Democratic public communication spaces

In addition to the arguments, analysis and suggestions laid out below, our Working Group would like to share both a definition and a description of "digital public communication spaces". We hope that our movement and our collective actions can be strengthened if we hold a clear, shared vision for the spaces where we communicate our lives, our needs, and our dreams as human beings.

The definition we arrived at is:

> Democratic public communication spaces are spaces for considered dialogue – both analogue and digital – that would explicitly strengthen excluded voices; guarantee citizens the right to own and control their data, information and knowledge, free from commercial, state or other co-option; and contribute to, uphold and validate social justice, communication rights and the common good.

A fuller description of this vision is that democratic public communication spaces would fully respect and promote fundamental human rights, and hold the ideas of the common good, social justice, enabled citizenship, and communication rights and responsibilities at their heart. These spaces

would manifest within the broader range of democratic public spaces, and it is often at the shifting boundaries between the two that these core ideas must be upheld and reinforced.

In these spaces, citizens would have equal access to data, information, knowledge and opportunities for exploring and understanding expert insights. This would be based on minimum guaranteed access to cost-free or affordable media, information and literacy training (formal and informal); analogue, digital and online systems; software and hardware; connectivity, bandwidth and networks; and sustainable energy sources for their communication technology. The current primacy of online spaces must not be allowed to override the many existing and necessary forms of analogue communication and connection, including radio, theatre, music and public art. We also recognise the vital role of public theology and faith communities in ensuring that the core ideas behind democratic public communication spaces are taught, sustained and made manifest.

Citizens' access to these communication resources would be appropriately protected from threats to privacy and security, or processes of exploitation, surveillance, capture or domination by state, private or other actors; this must be undergirded by strong legislative and regulatory frameworks which are devised through strong, diverse stakeholder consultations and that ensure accountability and transparency at a local, regional, national and international level. Locally created, community-managed materials and media would be legally safeguarded, encouraged and appropriately resourced, and citizens would be encouraged and trained to create, co-design, innovate and localise content and technologies to suit their needs. Public communication spaces would safeguard knowledge and data commons that operate independently and/or in relationship with private- and government-owned communication spaces.

While citizens would be invited to actively listen and generously share their knowledge, ideas and opinions – in a spirit of self-reflective, open-hearted, constructive dialogue – legislation and regulation would rigorously protect the shared communication space from hate speech and misinformation, and the victimisation and delegitimization of contributors and contributions. Clear, accessible mechanisms for complaint and redress will help protect citizens from abuse and threats in these spaces. The openness of a democratic public communication space would allow citizens to development and disseminate their critiques of existing governance, communication and media, as well as making it possible for them to influence governments' positions in global/regional governance arenas on communication, media, data, AI and communication issues.

Specific measures would need to be enacted to ensure the full, free and fair participation and voice of historically excluded groups, which should be guaranteed to them on their own terms. These individuals and communities include women, the disabled, gender and/or sexually diverse people, lower-caste and lower-class groups, marginalised races and ethnicities, and those living in minoritised languages and cultures. The representation, vibrancy and expression of living languages and cultures – in their full breadth and diversity – must be maintained and strengthened.

We acknowledge that myriad different forms of democratic public space already exist, both on and off the internet. In their digital iterations, we recognise that these spaces are built on a wide range of public, community or even commercial digital platforms, and are created by actors from civil society, public bodies and user communities. It is our hope that our work at this symposium will help these spaces to develop, strengthen and multiply.

What is at stake

We live in a world in which public spaces, including democratic public communication spaces, are methodically sidelined, oppressed or eliminated in order to advance global corporate agendas and

overweening state control (Deibert, 2020). This is in line with the current embedded dominance of neoliberal economic and governance systems that have been disseminated by the Global North and imposed on the Global South, and operate as the dominant powers behind, beneath and around our "public" spheres (Couldry et al., 2018). Packaged as our current system is in the wrappings of bourgeois individualism – which lauds the primacy of consumer choice and self-fulfilment over all other goals – we as humans, we as citizens, are being forcibly reconfigured as passive subjects and systematically divided from our communities of purpose, faith and daily living. Our ability to dream of a common good, and to join hands and voices to bring it into existence, is being put beyond our reach by seemingly invulnerable corporate and state interests. The pace at which change is occurring denies us the luxury of consideration, assessment and negotiation, and vital decisions about our well-being and our communication spaces are wrested from our control before we and our elected leaders know they exist.

These are not minor issues.

We see global platforms' and corporations' domination of online spaces, which many assume to be public but are in fact privately owned. In the Global North and much of the Global South, the domination of global internet powers like Google, Apple, Facebook, Tencent and Weibo remains all but unrestricted, an ever-more powerful group of actors who remain unaccountable to the rule of law (national and international), taxes and users, even despite initiatives like Europe's General Data Protection Regulation (https://gdpr-info.eu/). This is merely the digital phase of decades of media convergence into the hands of fewer owners and powerholders, which is now expressed through digital platforms which control and coerce our media consumption, our information access and many of our private affairs (Wu, 2016). Consider Facebook's shutdown of Australia's news (and other) sites in protest at the nation's News Media Bargaining Code (MEAA, 2021), TikTok's algorithms which can identify if a 13-year-old is interested in racist content within four hours (and then supply it to them) (Dias, McGregor, & Day, 2021), or Google's specific purchase of YouTube in 2006 to capture audiences for its advertisers (Zuboff, 2019). This system has been termed "surveillance capitalism" (Zuboff, 2019), where the spaces and interactions of civil society are routinely violated, co-opted and commercialised "to turn all human lives and relations into inputs for the generation of profit. Human experience, potentially every layer and aspect of it, is becoming the target of profitable extraction" (Couldry & Mejias, 2019, p. 4).

The excesses of state intervention in purportedly public spaces are demonstrated through at least 10 governments' use of the Pegasus spyware tool against journalists and citizens (OCCRP, 2021; Priest, Timberg, & Mekhennet, 2021) and China's embrace of surveillance to the point that "cameras perch on every street corner and bots monitor every corner of the internet" (Ivanescu & Carlson, 2021, para. 1; Mitchell & Diamond, 2018). China had 770,000 surveillance cameras in late 2019, a number expected to reach 1 billion by the end of 2021 (Lin & Purnell, 2019); there are credible fears it will capitalise on their Covid protection measures to further embed and expand its surveillance regime (Bernot, Trauth-Goik, & Trevaskes, 2021). In China, as elsewhere, the results of this surveillance are then sometimes converted to censorship and political repression of citizens, journalists and web users (Xu & Albert, 2017), in a situation where media is so dominated by state-run outlets that China is ranked at 177 out of 180 countries for press freedom (Couldry et al., 2018; Reporters Without Borders, 2021). This dramatic overreach into citizens' public and private spaces, and the data which are mined from them in every digital interaction, is a manifestation of what Couldry and Mejias (2019) call "data colonization", where data itself is used to control and capture human life. In both the commercial and the state contexts, data is now considered the world's most valuable

commodity – akin, in fact, to oil ("Regulating the internet giants: The world's most valuable resource is no longer oil, but data," 2017).

Further, corporations and states are increasingly collaborating to implement data-rich technologies – automation, artificial intelligence and algorithms – to manage and implement what have previously been key social services that operate in our public spaces. US judges are using the Compas AI program to predict whether prisoners seeking probation will reoffend upon release, and sentencing them according to Compas' guidance despite the system lacking all transparency (Smith, 2019). Virginia Eubanks (2018), also in the US, has examined how AI, developed from biased programming and data sources, then reinforces inequality within automated welfare systems. Similarly processes are also widely documented in medicine, e.g. systematically misjudging the illness of Black patients in the US (Obermeyer, Powers, Vogeli, & Mullainathan, 2019), and in education, e.g. an Ofqual algorithm wrongly grading 40% of British A-level students (Kolkman, 2020).

What is common to these state, commercial and hybrid systems is their near-absolute impunity, their lack of transparency, accountability and responsibility to citizens, tax payers, users and individuals worldwide. What is also common is our inability to avoid what has become universalised, baked into every interaction offered to us on a digital platter and in digitally monitored physical spaces. As citizens, we cannot to choose to opt out of this level of control, and we are failed by the existing systems of governance at national, international and transnational levels when they are "most directly responsive to the asserted needs of private entities" (Couldry et al., 2018, p. 22) than they are to citizens demanding their communication rights. It is vital that the international communications infrastructure, especially online, is appropriately controlled because "[t]he power of private actors, mainly tech giants, to determine the protection of human rights and shape democratic values on a global scale is mediated via the network's architecture" (De Gregorio & Radu, 2020, para. 18). One such proposal is a Digital Stability Board (DSB), to respond to existing governance which is "ad hoc, incomplete and insufficient" (Fay, 2019, para. 2).

Another hybrid which we should be wary of is the alliance between political parties, fundamentalist groups, and repressive forms of communication which thrive in online environments, such as disinformation, misinformation and hate speech. Following a definition by WACC Latin America, fundamentalisms – in their diversity – each cleave unconditionally to a truth, expressed through the literal interpretation of a religious, political or economic text or discourse; they flee ambiguity and unconditionally accept authoritarian leadership (Pérez Vela, 2006, p. 12). Such alliances are growing worldwide, especially among certain sectors of Buddhism, Islam and Hinduism.

A recent study by Magali Cunha (2020) focused on fundamentalist religious groups, including Catholic and Neopentecostal groups among others, in four South American countries – Argentina, Brazil, Colombia and Peru. Cunha traced the connections between online actions of those groups and extremist politicians and policies gaining the ascendancy in the national democratic sphere. These actions included extensive online disinformation and hate speech campaigns against other parties and beliefs, reaching levels of regional coordination (as in the case of the "Don't Mess with My Children" campaign which began in Peru and spread online to six other Latin American nations) and impacting on electoral results in Brazil, assisting in Jair Bolsonaro's election to the presidency. Such dramatic online positions are, however, rewarded by social media algorithms which prioritise extreme views and thus contribute to increasing polarisation on- and offline (Aral, 2020). The spread of misinformation by some Latin American religious groups is also having a public health impact in the global Covid pandemic, with BBC Mundo finding that 5% of the most popular antivaccine posts on Spanish-language Facebook were primarily by self-identified evangelicals (Equipo de Periodismo Visual de BBC Mundo, 2021). There are, however, considered responses being generated by faith

communities in South America to respond to these totalising movements and discourses. One is Resistência Reformada in Brasil (https://www.facebook.com/rreformada20) which engages its online communities in discussions and workshops to support democracy, while the Comunidad Teológica Ecuménica in Chile (https://ctedechile.cl/) uses its social media platforms to develop conversations around options for Chile's new constitution.

What does the injustice look like

Fighting inequality is fundamental to the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations (UN), n.d.), which "embraced 'leaving no one behind' as the cardinal principle to guide all sustainable development efforts at local, national, regional and global levels" (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), 2019, p. 2). The goal related to communication, SDG 9.c, was so urgent that it was due for completion by 2020, not 2030: "Significantly increase access to information and communications technology and strive to provide universal and affordable access to the Internet in least developed countries by 2020" (Ritchie & Mispy, 2020). The goal is fuzzy ("significantly increase") and it is unclear whether it has been met or not in September 2021: we don't know who has been left behind by this measure.

What is clear is that with internet access or not, there are many other inequalities which beleaguer our technology and communication systems. A central driver of exclusion and marginalisation is the absence of digital, economic, political and social justice in the available communication spaces, digital or otherwise. This has been spotlighted during the Covid crisis, even in the world's wealthiest nations like the United Kingdom (Ong, 2021). While there is much to say on this topic, we will merely signpost some issues which we assume will be covered in more depth by the Working Group on Digital Justice, such as: the many manifestations and instantiations around the sadly worsening digital divide; the absence of meaningful access for all to tools, technologies and platforms; and the dominant mystification and elitism around communication governance, infrastructures and techniques (Couldry et al., 2018; UN Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation (UNSG), 2019; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), 2021).

Another social cause of exclusion online is the shamefully global, constant and destructive harassment of women, girls and minority groups online (especially women of colour and Black women), be they journalists, politicians, activists or women whose situation of domestic violence has moved into the digital sphere (APC (Association for Progressive Communications), 2020; Civicus, 2021; El Asmar, 2020; Kakande et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2019). This kind of bullying and exclusion has a chilling effect on women and girls' participation in the digital communication sphere, and the failure of media platforms to respond effectively and rigorously to such systematic violence further limits safe spaces for public participation (Azelmat, 2021).

And finally, and arguably most destructively, is the catastrophic loss of languages and cultures in modern times, which can be traced back to the dawn of European colonialism in the 16 century and the many nations and tongues which fell in its path. This is epitomised by the official languages of the United Nations (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish), which mostly gained their current dominion through "discovery" and globalisation. Today, although Ethnologue (2021) counts 7139 living languages across the globe, over 40% are endangered and over 240 have become extinct in the last 70 years (UNESCO, 2016). UNESCO also reports that most endangered languages on its records have populations smaller than 100,000, the minimum number believed necessary to ensure intergenerational transmission; 76% of those languages have fewer than 10,000 speakers, making their chances of survival and regeneration slim indeed. Michael Krauss' (1992) dire prediction that 90% of the world's languages would fall silent before 2100 is all too likely to be accurate. Every single

one of those languages holds within it hundreds or thousands of years of the culture, history, stories, wisdom and lifeways of its community and its sustainable relationship with the earth. Too many languages, communities and connections have been eliminated by “killer languages” (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2003) like the one you’re reading now.

This rapid negation of linguistic and cultural diversity is being ably supported by the internet: only 7% of the world’s language appear online (Bouterse, Sengupta, Allman, & Pozo, 2018). Of the content available in the top 10 million websites, 60.4% are in English with, in second place, 8.5% in Russian. The 20th language, Ukrainian, provides only 0.4% of web content (Bhutada, 2021). In terms of the primary language of internet users, English again dominates with 25.9%, with Chinese [sic – presumably Mandarin] second at 19.4%. Almost 77% of users operate speak one of just 10 languages (Statista, 2021). Minority and oral languages are especially liable to exclusion, as are those written in a script other than the Latin one used in most European languages, although some revitalised languages are thriving in online communities (e.g. Cornish) (DiSanto, 2019; Trancozo Trevino, 2020).

The potential for digital spaces to maintain or reawaken sleeping languages is rightly disputed. On the one hand, many Indigenous communities have taken advantage of the internet to protect their languages, with or without support or funding from government, philanthropists and NGOs ("Indigenous languages in the internet age: How for-profit and non-profits alike help the Americas' languages go digital," 2019; Whose Knowledge?, 2019). On the other, many communities are being aggressively funnelled into online language maintenance by those same entities, against the wishes of speakers who want to prioritise the vitality of their languages in physical, human spaces (Bird, 2020). Such real-life linguistic encounters are the aim of organisations like Language Party (https://www.languageparty.org/), which hosts in-person story-telling events in the many languages of local communities – Indigenous, settler, migrant and refugee.

The push for digital language protection is just one manifestation of the prevailing technological determinism embodied in our communications infrastructures. Ramesh Srinivasan criticises the genericising term “the last billion”, for example, used to describe those who aren’t connected to the internet and mobile-phone technologies, which was coined by Google cofounder Larry Page and Nicholas Negroponte of the MIT Media Laboratory and One Laptop Per Child project. Srinivasan states, “Perniciously, it implies that the indigenous peoples of the Andes or the herdspeople of the Kalahari desert simply cannot wait to receive the blessings of Western technology” (Srinivasan, 2017, p. 4). Rather than individualising those 1 billion humans, or consulting them as to what their technological and communication needs might be, “the last billion” exemplifies their status as passive subjects in a global digital autocracy.

What can be done

A clear contrast to insulting techno-determinism is the work of the Shifting the Power Coalition and its program Pacific Young Women Transforming Climate Crisis to Climate Justice. This program is designed to train emerging women leaders from six Pacific Nations to communicate their needs and perspectives in regard to the dramatic climate crisis facing the Pacific. Rather than funders or project managers imposing communication technologies on participants, 90 young women were surveyed to discover the media and platforms that would best enable them to participate and innovate. These included a combination of traditional and new media which is adaptable across a diversity of island nations – phone-based social media, radio broadcasts, comic books and community media (Shifting the Power Coalition, 2021) – and also highlights that social media are not universally destructive, however tempting that analysis might be.

Another key issue is the decreasing power and presence of public broadcasters and public interest media worldwide, typically established to help “societies be well-informed, politically engaged and socially cohesive” (Gardner, 2018, p. 3). Their decline is one reason for the dearth of quality information and vital knowledge available to ordinary citizens and audiences. Former Wikipedia executive Sue Gardner (2018) reports that public broadcasters, such as the BBC, CBC, ABC, RTE and PBS, produce more news, politics and public affairs information – and present it in a less-sensationalist and more-balanced way – than equivalent commercial broadcasters. Individuals who consume public broadcaster news are likelier to vote, better informed, more likely to have realistic perceptions on social issues and less likely to express negatives about immigrants and immigration. Nations which fund their public broadcasters appropriately also have “have higher levels of social trust, and the people who live in them are less likely to hold extremist political views” (pp. 6-7). If we want our communities to benefit from quality information and stronger connections, it is important that funding models are revitalised and strengthened, perhaps through appropriate public subsidies (Deane, 2021) or global support such as the International Fund for Public Interest Media (https://luminategroup.com/ifpim). In tandem, communications infrastructure must also be publicly owned to ensure autonomy from private commercial interests (Pariser & Allen, 2021).

In addition to public communications infrastructure, community-managed infrastructure must be funded, legislated for and supported at a national and local level. A recent groundbreaking example is the Roberto Arias Connectivity Program which was launched in Argentina in June this year, with the aim of "build[ing] and deploy[ing] community networks in different regions of the country that still lack connectivity a whole 25 years after internet service was first introduced in Argentina" (AlterMundi, 2021). The program is the result of three years' advocacy by community organisations, and has led to policy and financial support for basic communication rights, but has since been halted by legal appeals by telecommunications companies defending their domination and profits. While AlterMundi (https://altermundi.net/) focuses on internet connectivity on the principles of community, freedom and decentralisation, Rhizomatica (https://www.rhizomatica.org/) does similar work in Mexico with a focus on autonomous GSM networks and digital HF networks.

This rare allocation of funds in Argentina serves as a counterpoint to the almost universal dearth of financing for programs which enable the solid work of social change. It must be carefully researched, participatively designed, collaboratively developed and autonomously rolled out, managed and monitored (as far as possible), in order to ensure that sustainable, high-quality outcomes are achieved.

A key response to the systemic exclusions of the dominant communications paradigm is training in media production and media and information literacy (again, analogue, digital and online). Community-based education, both formal and informal, helps develop a populace which has ownership of its voice, its message and its means of communication. This is valid in every country, on every continent: Milpa Digital in Costa Rica (https://milpadigital.org/) produces digital and print comics to skill up rural populations, Free/Dem in India (http://freedem.in/) introduces women in poor urban areas to mobile-based communications and practices, Digital Safe-Tea in Uganda and Nigeria (https://digitalsafetea.com/) has gamified online security training for women, and Stiftung Neue Verantwortung in Germany (www.stiftung-nv.de) provides information on digital news literacy as part of its work to strengthen the digital sphere. Beyond learning to interpret media, citizens must have access to training in media production and distribution, as the not-for-profit Near Media Co-operative does in Ireland (www.near.ie). Near trains volunteers to produce and participate in community radio, TV and podcasting. And finally, organisations like Tactical Tech in Germany (https://tacticaltech.org/) offer skills in data, security and "digital detoxing".

Recommendations

The problems and solutions around our current media and communication ecosystem have been much rehearsed, and our working group has not attempted to respond to entirety of the complex, deep-seated issues of concern. We value the comprehensive and detailed recommendations, action plan and tool kit which appear in *Inequality and Communicative Struggles in Digital times* (Couldry et al., 2018), and the careful recommendations in *The Age of Digital Interdependence* (UN Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation (UNSG), 2019). Readers may also find useful *The Montreal Declaration for Responsible AI Development* (2017), *The Public Service Media and Public Service Internet Manifesto* (Fuchs & Unterberger, 2021) and Appendix 2 in van der Waal et al. (2020), which lists the values held by independent online initiatives in relation to digital public spaces.

As a working group, we have condensed our most urgent recommendations into the following and we trust they will support democratic public communication spaces to thrive, be they on- or offline. In line with the definitions of public space provided in the introduction, these recommendations can assist in creating spaces that are open, accessible, comfortable and sociable. Activities can be

engaged in safely and within the users' control, and with luck users can participate in a space whose governance is transparent, accountable and sovereign to the users.

Ethical and theoretical

1. Ensure justice, equity, equality: content, languages, cultures, forms, channels, platforms, devices…
2. Guarantee affordable access to autonomous, local, democratically controlled media production and dissemination
3. Prioritise voices/spaces of those who have traditionally been excluded, isolated or neglected in media, communication and political ecosystems

Political

4. Create civil and faith-based communities of resistance to the neoliberal, consumerist ideology which enables current media ecosystems to thrive
5. Build widespread, global coalitions of interest – transparent, participatory, collaborative – to expand the public sphere, between digital and analogue industries, civil society and inter/governmental bodies

Educational

6. Build awareness of the complex nature – both positive and negative – of the digital "public" sphere and digital "public" spaces
7. Develop communication skills: Dialogue, conversation, negotiation, listening, openness to contrary opinions
8. Ensure availability of low-cost or cost-free media, information and digital literacy training

Technical

9. Ensure meaningful access to affordable, quality devices, technology, systems and networks
10. Normalise open, interoperable data, software, hardware, platforms and standards
11. Support and encourage open source, creative commons and culturally appropriate, shared ownership of information and knowledge

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