

Presentation Symposium Communication for Social Justice in a Digital Age

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Many thanks to the organizers of the Symposium for Social Justice in a Digital Age for this invitation, which is a great honor for me. This process, which has involved months of work, is undoubtedly a commitment; a commitment on the part of the ecumenical movements to move towards actions and strategies for the future, at a time when humanity is going through abrupt, dynamic changes that are hard to understand in the short term. Observing, recognizing and acting on the basis of these changes, in the context of a world that is suffering through a pandemic and at the climax of the technological revolution, is almost a must for the ecumenical movement as a whole. This is true for both its actions from the political advocacy perspective, as well as in ethical and biblical theological reflections.

My name is Marcelo Leites, I am Uruguayan, but I live in Argentina. I was Regional Secretary of the WSCF (World Student Christian Federation) for Latin America and the Caribbean until February of this year, and there I also worked as director of the Federation's Ecological and Economic Justice Program. Since last February I have worked as Secretary General of the WSCF. This has meant a change for my professional life, reaffirming my commitment to the challenges that lie ahead. The WSCF is the oldest of the ecumenical organizations; founded in 1895, it serves young people and more specifically students, bringing together more than 100 Christian student movements (affiliates and associates) around the world.

What brings us here today (be it in the morning, afternoon or evening) is a desire to talk about some visions for the future of social justice in the digital age, as members of the international ecumenical family. In the last three days, we have seen inspiring and fascinating discussions and we have learned a lot. And I dare to think that many of us have discovered a whole world of complex relationships between the technologies of the digital age, the digital platform economy, the media, social networks, algorithms and big data. And of course, we have also discovered some of the consequences of this form of development on our social, economic, and political relationships, both in terms of progress, and in ways that are not so positive for most people. We have seen transformations in international geopolitics, financial markets, work and the future of work.

First, I would like to start by clarifying that I am not an expert on the subject, but at the WSCF we have recently started to work on it and it will likely be an important issue in the development of our new strategic plan. This is especially true in terms of how social action, advocacy and youth activism have been transformed by the new ICTs. Without a doubt, the arrival of the Internet 20 years ago transformed our world in every possible way; however, it

was the dawn of massive digital platforms that finally achieved the radical transformation that led us to the world we live in today.

To give some context, I would like to comment on some elements that might help our understanding and later bring up some ideas, which will be more like questions than definitive answers.

1) Emphasis on the business model and not on technological advancement.

The business model and surveillance. Digital capitalism and accumulation, control and manipulation of our privacy and intimacy.

Human beings are no longer at the center of the process as the subject (or object) of consumption, in the way one might expect in more classical forms of capitalism. In digital capitalism, people are part of an economic/commercial flow: our information is the product. In this age of information and digital platforms, we ourselves are the product. The refinements, updates or improvements made to the platforms or digital services that we consume have no other purpose than to improve the field where the product can also be refined, so that the product sold by the large digital platforms is more profitable in some way. People are the product now, and corporations are the customer.

This changes the entire outlook and the ideas we have held for years. Information on absolutely everything we do passes from hand to hand through servers which are able to think for us and even predict what we want based on algorithms and artificial intelligence. In that sense, if we are the product: are our information, preferences, political opinions, activism, social relationships, and geolocation in real time, safe from exposure to an elite group that controls this flow of information? Indeed they are not.

As we can see, it is not just about selling us goods or a service. Algorithms constantly learn from our preferences; they can predict what we want to buy, who we want to vote for, our political and ideological choices and ideas. They also have the ability to manipulate the information we receive based on interests that go far beyond the economic. It is about shaping our ways of thinking, acting and feeling according to the preferences of the highest bidder. And this raises a deeply complex problem from an ethical perspective, and therefore a problem whose nature is theological. Is free will at stake in the digital age?

(Let's say that we are users who are happy with the status quo, and therefore not dangerous to the system, but what about all those who risk their lives for a cause every single day, defending human rights? What about the activists who are being constantly watched?)

But the digital revolution does not only impact our personal preferences, our privacy and individual rights; it also has an impact on the collective. For instance, in practical terms, it can affect the world of work or in certain cases the religiosity of some digital platforms. It has led people to believe that we could have a world where there are no bosses, where there is only collaboration. We had even believed that “*uberization*” of the economy was a collaborative alternative that represented solidarity. Far from that, this process has changed into a model that makes employment more flexible and more precarious.

In this sense we can conclude that in the digital age, the future of life choices, work and privacy will be exposed to surveillance and hegemonic control, following the underlying logic that people who are controlled and fearful make better product consumers. It is a win-win business. The obscene surveillance of everything we do, including our political and social tastes, with the aim of controlling us, is essential to a system that determines what we want even before we know it ourselves.

2) The dispute of hegemonies in the economic, religious, media and political fields.

Deregulation and the debate or dispute of narratives. Youth and Rebellion.

Through their tools, which are not ideology-free (because they follow economic patterns), the deregulation of technologies and digital platforms has served **to promote neo-conservative narratives that have been incorporated into social media and beyond**. One example among many is that they have managed to reopen a debate about ethical questions that were no longer up for debate, so much so that bringing them up again is like going back to before the Second World War. And my intention here is not **demonize technological advancement, but rather the accompanying business model**.

This is not only done through manipulation; it is also part of a complex network that includes the traditional media (who are trying to position themselves in the digital market), as well as conservative and extremist groups and the international economic lobby. What one might call the real power. Fundamentalist and extremist movements, organizations promoting conspiracy theories, anti-science groups and so-called anti-establishment groups, have found in these technologies and their deregulation, a powerful way to get themselves into more traditional narratives, transforming them and over-representing themselves in the public space.

Language:

In this regard, the power of creating or appropriating language has had a very important role. Extremists are beginning to adopt and use terms and concepts that were once used by progressive and emancipation movements. Twenty years ago, it was impossible to imagine a young fundamentalist and far-right activist who called himself a “rebel” or a “revolutionary” at the same time as he shouted “death to the state” or claimed that human rights are a fallacy. But today, emancipation language like this has been hijacked by many ultra-conservative libertarian movements.

The over-representation and indulgence of these narratives on social platforms and traditional media leads one to think of or coin the idea of the propagation of digital fascism (completely free of guilt). When this takes the streets of our capitals through social network driven “self-organized” marches against migrants, or marches that are nationalist, misogynist or demand the death of the state, this Twitter fascism becomes a real danger for everyone who is different.

Today, "rebellion" appears to young people in the form of anti-vaccination, conspiracy or death-to-communism type ideas ("communism" having come to mean anything that does not include ultra-liberal ideas, such as the United Nations, or, during the pandemic, the WHO), and going deeper, the disappearance of everyone who does not think like them.

In that sense, digital tools are not neutral, because they respond to the people who pay for the clicks, or to the parties that pay to get the information of the users who have clicked. We have seen it in Brazil and in the United States. "I can't imagine a humble church in Latin America that promotes the values of solidarity, paying for adverts and clicks to spread their ideas or values, like the North American "libertarian" foundations do with small satellite organizations in the global south in order to spread, sustain and position a fundamentalist economic, political and religious discourse."

These same young people are the ones who have turned, almost *en masse*, towards extremist options, mainly from libertarian groups. They oppose human rights, science, climate change, and even deny the global pandemic caused by COVID-19.

Challenges for the future, some ideas or hypotheses to contribute to the debate.

Technologies have changed the lives of many people, improving our quality of life, connecting us with each other, and in many cases improving access to information, as well as transparency and health services and quality of life in general. It is not a matter of advocating for a technological apocalypse or a great blackout. But one must consider some of the following things, given that we are pushing ethical limits to the point that they threaten the privacy of the individual and the dignity of the collective.

a) **Building elevating and transformative counter-narratives:**

The "anti-establishment" or conspiratorial forms of discourse, or those that are extremist or fundamentalist, are over-represented in social media and platforms, and are useful both to the traditional hegemonic media and to the real sources of power. **Ultimately, they are a subculture of those not-very-transformative hegemonic narratives.** Fighting against the hegemonic narratives of the new technological languages and of the new forms of extremism and fundamentalism that are jeopardizing the entire system of ethical principles, rights and science in the pursuit of an anarchy that only benefits those who already control our information as well as the corporations (business, political) that consume it.

b) **Concentration of wealth and inequalities as part of technological development.**

Recognizing the exacerbation of inequalities brought about by digital capitalism. The CEOs of Internet technology companies (social, economic, e-commerce, or those that deal with finance or software) had accumulated more money than 3.5 billion people in the world even before the pandemic. Since the pandemic, this situation has only become more pronounced. The concentration of wealth in the hands of a few people when compared with huge majorities is absolutely obscene, and this is the basis of digital capitalism. The digital age, based

on the corresponding business model, far from sharing emancipation technologies and enhancing economic development, has increased the inequality gap. And part of the religiosity of the technology market, of Silicon Valley and of Wall Street, continues to preach a form of meritocracy.

A fair, transparent and equitable transition:

Meritocracy as the form of religion of the digital age is expanding and positioning itself as part of the hegemonic discourse. "The idea that we can all occasionally be the entrepreneur of our own self transcends the digital world, but it is connected to the growth and development of start-ups and entrepreneurship." Discussing this system is also an ethical must. A multi-disciplinary ecumenical coalition, based on theological principles and advocacy, should promote fair transitions in the labor market within the framework of the 4th industrial revolution. The discourse of progress, as part of the voracious advance of the new technologies, is almost a contradiction, given that the labor market itself as well as its future is in jeopardy and there does not seem to be a fair transition for the workers replaced by cybernetic systems, algorithms and the automation of industry.

- c) **The empathic rejection of the agglomeration of monopolies, seeking regulation and social control, and also the rejection of the idea of *pior tempore prio jure*:** Digital pioneers do not have the royal right to regulate themselves. We must promote a kind of digital regulation that is inclusive and equitable, includes solidarity and promotes peace by rejecting all forms of hate speech. Basically, a form of legislation that allows access to culture, communication and the interaction with information, and that respects the most fundamental human rights. This action is not only urgent, it is prophetic. Faced with a world that changes at the speed of millions of clicks and shares information through more than 50 billion digital devices connected to the Internet, it is urgent that we reflect in an ethical, theological and biblical way to develop advocacy actions based on human rights. And this is urgent, because every second that goes by there are new advances and new violations of fundamental rights.
- d) **Proposing a comprehensive system that guarantees human rights.** This must include not only the fight for individual privacy, as well as the right not to be found, the right to disappear from the servers, the right not to be persecuted or tracked, but also a whole system of social, cultural and economic rights that encompasses the world of work, education, non-discrimination and also opportunities for access to culture, and that protects collective and not just individual well-being.
- e) **Avoiding the problem of the digital capsule and promoting the role of the ecumenical movement.** The church and faith-based ecumenical organizations have a great role to fulfill in the post-pandemic world, building in-person community. It is necessary that we hug again, that we share a table, that we meet students and young people face to face. Starting over in an era where the hope for the future of all people is not a "new normal", with our faith placed in technology as a source of hope for development, but rather, the idea that another world is possible (which is not

normal at all if we look at our pre-pandemic ways of life). Neither the hegemonic means of communication, nor the digital, economic, social and production platforms, occupy or should occupy the space where we meet the other, that person who is different, that brother of the church. Today there is concern that we have everything at our fingertips: relationships through social networks, purchases through e-commerce, food through ordering platforms, deliveries through digital transport platforms. Also, we have learned that we can work from home. But what are the costs for the future of young people, *pandemics* or even for church life, as well as for the social life of people and universities? We have to avoid digital encapsulation. This does not only lead us to isolate ourselves and be a bit more individualistic, but it also takes us away from our social and political activism.

The hope that we want to promote cannot be similar to that of a world that failed to dignify the lives of the majority of people. It must be transformative and fair. One that unifies people but does so with equality and equity.